

Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2

SUPER CHEAT POWERS



9

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri



Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2

SUPER CHEAT POWERS



9

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

Chillin' in Another World

with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers Volume 9

Contents

➡ Chapter 1 ∞ Flio's House Gets Even Bigger	
➡ Chapter 2 ∞ Are These Goddesses Useful For Anything?! (Descent of the No-Goddess)	
➡ Chapter 3 ∞ Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought	
➡ Chapter 4 ∞ Rys, the Goddess?	
➡ ∞ Epilogue	
➡ Side Story ∞ Everyone's Morrow Part 9	

Story by Miya Kinojo ∞ Illustrations by Katagiri



Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers

 Flio Former Hero Candidate and General Store Proprietor.	 Rys Flio's wife, a lupine demon.	 Wyne (Human Form) Freeloader with high stats and a big appetite.	
 Garyl Flio and Rys's son. Caught the eye of the Maiden Queen.	 Elinàsze Flio and Rys's daughter. A real daddy's girl.	 Rylnàsze Flio and Rys's daughter. Adored by Sybe and magic beasts everywhere.	 Sybe (Unicorn Rabbit Form) Flio's household pet.
 Hiya The Djinn who Commands the Origin of Light and Darkness.	 Damalynas The Grand Magus of Midnight. In training in Hiya's mindscape.	 Belano A quiet, shy, and skittish teacher.	 Belalio Minilio and Belano's child.

Super Cheat Powers

Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers



Ghozal
Once known as the mightiest Dark One in history.



Uliminas
Ghozal's former confederate in the Dark Army and current wife.



Balirossa
A former knight of Klyrode and wife of Ghozal.



Folmina
Ghozal and Uliminas's daughter.



Ghoro
Ghozal and Balirossa's son



Calsi'im
Former Dark Regent now staying at Flio's house along with Tia.



Tia
Magic doll, something of a wife to Calsi'im.



Rabbitz
Calsi'im and Tia's daughter. Loves to climb on top of Calsi'im's head.



Sleip (Human Form)
Former member of the Infernal Four. Adores his daughter Rislei.



Byleri
Former archer of Klyrode living in sin with Sleip.



Rislei
Sleip and Byleri's daughter. A bit of a precocious child.



Blossom
A former knight of Klyrode. Works hard on the farm.

Super Cheat Powers



Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers



Hero Gold-Hair

On the run from the law despite being the "hero."



Tsuya

Hero Gold-Hair's partner in crime. Worried about the group's finances.



Valentine

A beguiling djinn and former Evil General of the Realm of Evil. A deceptively big eater.



Dawkson

Ghozal's younger brother. Newly crowned Dark One and a believer in camaraderie.



Phufun

Dawkson's minion, a succubus, and an extreme masochist.



Belianna

A foul-mouthed devil who loves her little sister.



Irystiel

Garyl's classmate and Belianna's little sister.



Salina

Garyl's classmate. Seems to have feelings for him, but...



The Shadow King

The former King of Klyrode, and head of the Shadow Conglomerate.



Ellie (The Maiden Queen)

Hardworking queen with a strong sense of justice.



Greanyl

Shadow demon working for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.



Tanyalite

An amnesiac maid who showed up uninvited (Disciple of the Celestial Plane).

Super Cheat Powers

Chapter 1: Flio's House Gets Even Bigger

The world of Klyrode is a world of swords and sorcery, of magic beasts and demihumans, where humans and demons had waged war since time immemorial. However, that long war had finally been brought to an end when the Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, the greatest of the human kingdoms, and the Dark One Dawkson agreed to sign a peace treaty with each other. The Dark One Dawkson had once been a vainglorious despot, but he mended his ways and began to work to reunify a demonkind that had divided on itself, alongside his minion, Phufun, and the three new Infernals—Zanzibar, Belianna, and Coqueshtti. The Maiden Queen, meanwhile, was busy reorganizing her army—now that the Magical Kingdom's biggest threat was no longer the Dark Army but independent bands of pillaging demons—and improving relations with her nearby allies.

And so, the stage is set. The curtains rise...

◇Osahka Town◇

The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode stood at the very center of the inhabited world. The township of Osahka lay west of Klyrode Castle, the capital of the kingdom. It was an inland city, a good distance away from Dark Army territory, and it sat near an important highway running east to west. Well situated for commerce, this was a city that had long taken pride in its merchants.

A magic circle appeared in the shadow of a building a ways off the well-trafficked main street. It must have been enchanted with some kind of concealment spell, because the people passing by seemed to take no notice of the spectacle whatsoever. After a second, a strangely normal-looking door appeared. It opened with a creak, and out stepped Flio and Rys.

Flio was a merchant from another world who had been summoned as one of the candidates for the role of Hero. He had been granted a stupendously powerful blessing that gave him mastery of every skill and spell that existed within the world of Klyrode. Since then he married Rys, a former demon of the

Dark Army, and now worked as manager and proprietor of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

Rys was a lupine demon and a proud warrior. She had come to blows with Flio and was roundly defeated. Afterwards, she made the decision to walk alongside him as his wife. She adored her husband beyond words, and was something of a mother figure for everyone living at Flio's house.

The two had just teleported to Osahka Town from their home. The scenery of Flio's house was still visible through the open portal.

"The weather is so lovely here, isn't it?" said Rys, smiling as she placed a hand on her white hat to keep it from blowing away. "The wind feels so pleasant on my skin!" She was wearing her usual white dress, paired with a light-yellow cardigan. She followed alongside Flio, draping her arm around her husband's.

Flio gave Rys one of his usual easygoing smiles as the two set out in high spirits for the main street. "I know there are all sorts of things you can buy here in Osahka, but you can find most things in Houghtow too. Did we really need to come all this way?"

"That's true..." Rys muttered, pressing her finger against her lips as she thought for a moment. "I've already used most of the fabric you can find in Houghtow, I suppose. I want to create new clothing for everyone to wear, so it seemed fitting to try using some new materials." She smiled up at Flio, pressing her face close to his. "And most of all, I want some for the new child! I put a great deal of effort into making clothing when Garyl and Elinàsze were born, and I will do no less for our fourth."

Flio nodded in understanding. "That makes sense. I definitely want our daughter Rylnàsze to have good clothes to wear—not to mention the other children who were born on the same day... Tia and Calsi'im's daughter Rabbitz, and Belano and Minilio's child Belalio..." *I really can't say I ever imagined Rys would get so good at sewing, though...* he thought to himself. *When we first got married, she could hardly cook or sew anything at all! But when Balirossa's group started living with us, she declared that as the wife of the household master, she would never forgive herself if she couldn't see to everyone's needs. She's been pushing herself so hard...*

Rys was a lupine woman, and lupines were a species with strong pack-forming instincts. Customarily, the strongest lupine would be the head of the pack, and their mate would see to everyone's well-being. To Rys, it was self-evident that her status as wife of the household head would make her responsible for taking care of everyone living under their roof, and she spared no effort to live up to said responsibilities.

She does so much, for me and everyone... Flio's thoughts continued, as he recalled how Rys used to sneak out to study cooking and tailoring, attending classes without telling the rest of the house in order to improve her domestic skills as much as possible. "Rys..."

"What is it, my lord husband?"

"Thank you for everything you do for us. I really, really love you." Flio pulled Rys into a gentle hug, holding her to his chest.

Rys's face flushed red all the way to the tips of her ears. "M-M-My lord husband!" she protested, flustered, her eyes darting this way and that. "I-I-I truly am most happy to hear that, but you'll startle me if you say such things out of the blue! My heart wasn't ready! Ah ha ha..." Rys returned Flio's embrace. *Ah... she thought. I can't believe my lord husband sometimes, saying things like that with no warning whatsoever. But...it makes me so happy...* Rys closed her eyes and rested her head against her husband's chest.

Flio gazed down at Rys with a fond smile on his face. For a moment, they stood there, holding each other in their arms. Then, suddenly, Flio looked up. They had stepped away from the portal he had conjured, meaning that the Concealment spell he had cast was no longer in effect either. They were embracing in plain view of everyone walking along the main street.

"Goodness!" said a passerby. "Those two seem quite fond of each other!"

"You see that a lot in this town," said another.

Flio grimaced, acutely aware of the people talking about him. "A-Anyway, Rys, shall we head for the shop?" He began moving quickly away from the spot without waiting for an answer.

"A-Ah! My lord husband!" Rys frowned with dissatisfaction as Flio dragged

her along by the hand. *Oh, well...* she thought as the two vanished into the crowd. *I'll just have to ask for a generous encore later!*





Flio and Rys followed the main street to the Osahka shopping district and stepped inside one of the shops. One of the women inside was leaning against a pillar, smoking from a long-handled pipe and keeping an idle eye on the customers. When the couple entered, she stepped forward and greeted them with a familiar smile. “Well, well, if it isn’t Master Flio himself! It’s been half an age since I saw you last. Welcome to my establishment!” This was Fetabetcz, the proprietor.

“Good afternoon, Miss Fetabetcz,” said Flio. “How are you finding that magic tobacco I sold you?”

“I absolutely love it,” she said, gesticulating with her pipe. “I use it all the time. I never used to be able to smoke inside the store, or else the fumes would stink up the merchandise, but this stuff just vanishes into thin air when you smoke it. The smell isn’t an issue at all!”

Flio winced slightly. “I’m very glad you’re happy, but smoking too much is bad for your health, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. You can be a real stick-in-the-mud sometimes, Master Flio.” Fetabetcz said with a smirk. “So, are you here for our cloth? Feel free to look around all you like. Here at Osahka Town’s one and only Silkfleece, we’ve got fabrics from everywhere in the world!”

The Silkfleece Conglomerate, currently headed by none other than Fetabetcz, was a cloth wholesaling operation with a long pedigree. They stocked fabric and clothing from all over the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, as well as from neighboring lands. And they even supplied goods to the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

“Thank you very much,” said Flio. “We’re here on private business this time, actually. My wife was hoping to find a new kind of cloth to work with, you see.”

“Of course!” said Fetabetcz with a bright smile, turning her attention to Rys. “You’re more than welcome, madame. Please don’t hesitate to have a look.”

Rys bowed cheerfully. “Thank you! I’ll get to it at once, then.”

One of the shop's walls was crammed full of tightly packed rolls of various textiles, while different types of outfits were displayed all over the shop floor—not an inch of space was wasted. Rys's eyes shone with excitement as she looked it all up and down.

“You were right, my lord husband,” she said. “This shop really *does* have a tremendous amount of cloth and clothing. Oh, look! This kind is just wonderful! A-And this one... What in the world is that strange pattern?”

Rys ran her hands along the fabric to feel its texture, sometimes even pressing it to her cheek to get a better sense. Flio watched her work with his usual easygoing smile. *When I first met her, I would have never imagined I'd get to see Rys smile like that*, he thought. When they had first met, Rys had been magically disguised as a young girl. Balirossa's party had tried to capture her, and she faced off against them with unbridled hostility.

Flio took a sip of the tea Fetabetcz had given him as he fondly watched his wife inspect the merchandise. *Looking at her now, picking out cloth for the children's clothes, you'd never think she was the same person as back then...*

◇Meanwhile—Flio's House◇

Flio's house stood on a large plot of land outside the walls of Houghtow City, featuring a pasture for horses along with a large farm. As Rys browsed the cloth inventory over at Silkfleece, three children were following the path that led from the pasture to the fields. There was a tall boy, a smallish girl, and, walking along hand in hand between them, another girl who was even smaller. The tiny girl beamed up at the other two. “I love walking with big brother Garyl and big sister Elinàsze!” she chirped.

Rylnàsze was Flio and Rys's third birth child. Thanks to her mother Rys's demon blood, she was growing up very fast. She had already reached the equivalent development of a three-year-old human.

Elinàsze smiled back at her little sister. “Just be sure not to run off on your own, Rylnàsze,” she said. “It's hardly been any time at all since you were born!” Elinàsze was Garyl's older twin, and Rylnàsze's big sister. She was a serious-minded girl and a talented magic user who loved her father dearly.

Garyl, walking along on Rylnàsze's other side, grinned brightly. “Come running

to us if anything happens, okay? No trying anything dangerous alone.” He looked down at Rylàsze, a bit of worry showing on his face. Garyl was a good-natured boy with a ready smile—qualities that had won him no small amount of popularity in the primary school he attended at the Houghtow College of Magic. Plus, his physical prowess was entirely off the charts.

Rylàsze smiled up at her big brother. “I know!” she said, nodding cheerfully. “I am not meant to go out on my own! Going out with mother and father or my big brother and sister is more fun, anyway!”

Suddenly, the sound of flapping wings came from overhead! A girl with enormous dragon wings sprouting from her back fell from the sky and tackled Rylàsze from behind into a great big hug. “Ah ha ha!” the girl laughed. “Ryl-Ryl! You doing good?”

“Gawah?!” Rylàsze cried. Her eyes darted around in panic at being hugged from behind out of the blue like that, but when she realized who it was, a brand-new smile came over her face. “B-Big sister Wyne?!”

Wyne was a dragonewt—said to be the strongest of soldiers among dragonkind. Flio, however, had found her collapsed on the road one day and took her in, saving her life. From that day on, she lived as Flio and Rys’s adopted daughter, and therefore was an older sister to Elinàsze, Garyl, and Rylàsze.

“Yes!” Rylàsze answered. “I am doing very good!”

“Great, great!” said Wyne, beaming as she rubbed cheeks with her little sister. “I’m happy when you’re doing good, Ryl-Ryl! It makes dada and mama and Eli-Eli and Gare-Gare and everyone else happy too!”

Rylàsze beamed back, clutching her hat to keep it from falling off with Wyne rubbing up against her cheeks like that. “I’m happy too!”

“Great, great! And don’t worry, I’ll protect you lots too, Ryl-Ryl!”

As they were chatting happily, a sudden gust of wind blew up the hem of Wyne’s poncho-style outfit.

“Big sis Wyne!” Elinàsze cried, turning red in the face as she pushed Wyne’s dress back down. “Again?!”

“Whahuh...” Garyl stammered, quickly averting his gaze. “I—I could see her butt...” Indeed, Wyne was not wearing anything under that poncho of hers.

“Young Mistress Wyne!” A woman in a maid outfit with a pair of angelic wings on her back nimbly alighted to the ground.

“T-Tan-Tan!” Wyne exclaimed.

“My name is Tanya, not Tan-Tan!”

Tanya’s full name was Tanyalite. She was an angel, a disciple of the Celestial Plane sent to keep watch on Flio and his outlandish magic power, but she lost her memory in a freak midair collision with Wyne, and now worked for Flio as the household’s live-in maid.

“But, but! I think Tan-Tan sounds cuter!”

“It doesn’t need to be *cute*,” Tanya insisted. “But more importantly...!” She held out both her arms, her expression deadly serious. In one hand was Wyne’s bra, and in the other was a pair of panties. “Young Mistress Wyne, have I not told you many times that you *must* wear underwear when you go outdoors? I laid them out for you on your bed...”

Wyne frowned in protest. “B-But it’s so stuffy! I hate-hate it...”

“I understand that, as a dragon, your body temperature is unusually high, and so you prefer to wear loose-fitting clothes,” Tanya said. “However, a young lady of your age must not neglect to wear her undergarments!”

“Nuh-uh!”

“But you must!”

“Nuh-uh! Nuh-uh!”

Tanya thrust the bra and panties towards Wyne, who twisted her body out of the way. “Gawahah?!” Rylnàsze, still held tightly in Wyne’s arms, cried out in confusion and dismay as she was swung through the air.

“Snuffle snuffle!” Sybe the unicorn rabbit came running up to Wyne’s feet. Sybe was originally a wild psychobear Flio had met in a random encounter. As soon as it saw Flio, however, Sybe realized it had no hope of victory and surrendered, becoming the family pet. It spent most of its time in the unicorn

rabbit form which Flio had given it using his magic, but it had a peculiar habit of standing up on its hind legs. Sybe grabbed hold of Wyne's leg.

"Huh? Huh? What's up, Sybe?"

"Snuffle! Snuff-snuffle!"

"Huh? I'm making Ryl-Ryl dizzy?! My bad, my bad!" Whether Wyne could understand Sybe's speech or she simply noticed that Sybe was looking over at Rynàsze, she quickly lowered the young girl back to solid ground.

Rynàsze collapsed to the floor, clutching her head to try to make the spinning stop. "Oh me, oh my, oh dear..." Sybe ran up beside her, full of concern.

"Big sis Wyne, you should know better!" Elinàsze fumed as she marched up to the dragonewt. "Rynàsze is still young! You must be careful with her!" But then she stopped. It wasn't only Sybe who was worried for the young Rynàsze collapsed on the ground, she noticed—the horse magic beasts who lived in the pasture were drawing close out of concern, and even the little birds flying overhead had landed on Rynàsze's hat and shoulders to check in on her. "You know, I *thought* Sybe was rather fond of her... Does Rynàsze have some skill that makes animals like her, perhaps?"

Tanya tilted her head in thought. "I don't believe so... Master Flio inspected her just the other day, and said that she did not possess any skills..."

"Meaning animals just like her 'cause of who she is," Garyl said, stepping up from behind and patting Rynàsze gently on the head. "You're pretty amazing, Rynàsze." He clearly admired his little sister.

"E-Ehe he..." Rynàsze giggled, beaming up at Garyl as he patted her head. "Big brother praised me!"

The horses and birds alike cried out happily and nuzzled Rynàsze fondly.



Rislei watched Rynàsze and the rest continue merrily down the road from the pasture as she did her chores. "The horses really love Ryl, don't they...?" she mused, resting her hands on her hips and tilting her head.

Rislei was the daughter of Sleip, a demon lichsteed, and Byleri, a human. Sleip

and Byleri had ended up as the co-managers of the pasture outside Flio's house. Sleip was once a member of the Dark Army's Infernal Four, and many of the horses living at the pasture were various kinds of horse demons—his former subordinates. The rest were equine magic beasts Sleip or Flio or someone else had captured in the wild. Right now, most of the horse magic beasts had gone off towards Rynàsze.

How lovely... she thought. She treats me like a big sister too. I wish I had a real little sister who was that cute and good with horses...

As she was lost in thought, a large man came up from behind Rislei, wrapping his arms tight around her and hefting her into the air. "Ha ha ha! Risleeei!"

"P-Papa?! What are you—?!"

Sleip laughed uproariously as he held Rislei in his arms, nuzzling his cheeks against her. Formerly an Infernal, Sleip quit the Dark Army and ended up lodging at Flio's house where he spent his days looking after the horses. He and Byleri had never been formally married, but they lived together as lovers and had a daughter, Rislei, whom they loved very much.

"What's the matter, Rislei?" Sleip asked. "You had a look like you were thinking, *'I wish I had a real little sister who was that cute and good with horses...'*"

Rislei's eyes shot open. "Weh?! P-Papa, how did you know exactly what I was thinking?!"

Sleip laughed even more loudly than before. "Ha ha ha! I'm your papa, you know! Of course I can tell *that* much!" He set Rislei back on the ground, then looked around the pasture until he spotted a slender woman carrying a hay bale inside from the pasture. "Oh! Byleri, there you are!" he said, running over.

"Huh? Oh! Like, can I be of service to you, Lord Sleip?"

Byleri was once part of a knightly company from Castle Klyrode, where she served as an archer, but she quit knighthood and moved to Flio's house. There, she put her prodigious horse-handling skills to work looking after equine magic beasts of all sorts and lived out her days in bliss with her lover Sleip and daughter Rislei. She smiled up at Sleip, who suddenly scooped her up into his

arms in a princess carry. “Wha-huh?!” Byleri exclaimed. “L-Lord Sleip?”

“Well, if our precious Rislei wants a little sister so badly, you and I had better get to work!”

“Awuh?! L-Like, right now?!” Byleri’s face went a brilliant shade of red.

Sleip gazed down at Byleri as she turned redder and redder. “Hm? Is that a no?”

“I-I mean... I didn’t say *that*...”

“Ha ha ha! Then what’s the problem?” Laughing boisterously as always, Sleip carried Byleri away towards the house.

Rislei sighed, watching her father carry her mother indoors, her own face turning quite red as well. “Papa and mama are all over each other again, like always...”



A woman watched from the front yard as Sleip carried Byleri inside the house. She paused the friendly bout of swordplay she was engaged in with a much larger man. “I wonder what’s come over Byleri and Sir Sleip all of a sudden...” she wondered aloud, a curious look on her face. This was Balirossa, the former leader of the group of knights from Klyrode Castle who had been living at Flio’s house and helping out at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. She was one of Ghozal’s two wives, and the mother of Ghoros.

The large man she had been sparing with—Ghozal—folded his arms in thought. Ghozal was none other than the former Dark One Gholl, who had abdicated his throne in favor of his younger brother, Yuigarde, and now lived at Flio’s house as a human. He and Flio were something along the lines of best friends. He had taken two wives as well—Balirossa, the former knight, and Uliminas, his old confederate from the Dark Army. With them, he had two children—Ghoros and Folmina.

“Hrm...” Ghozal said. “I wonder if Byleri’s hurt somehow...”

“Ah, yes.” Balirossa nodded. “That would stand to reason, I suppose.”

A broad smirk came over Uliminas’s face when she heard what her husband

and co-wife were talking about. Uliminas was a hellcat, and had been Ghozal's closest confidant in the Dark Army. When Ghozal left, she quit alongside him. Now she worked at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store disguised as a demihuman. The other wife of Ghozal, she was the mother of Folmina.

"Come on meow, don't be ridiculous..." Uliminas muttered to herself. "Those two are *clearly* about to go at it like rabbits in the mewddle of the day!"

Tug tug... Folmina, who had been standing beside Uliminas, tugged at her mother's sleeve. Folmina was Ghozal and Uliminas's daughter, half demon royalty and half hellcat. She was equally attached to Uliminas and Balirossa, Ghozal's two wives, and had a serious infatuation with Garyl. Uliminas looked down to see her daughter gazing innocently up at her. "Mama Uliminas? What do you mean by 'go at it like rabbits'...?"

Uliminas winced perceptibly. "Mreow?! A-Ah! Well, erm, mew see..." she began. "Those two get along so well, right? They meowst be heading inside to spend some time...*getting along*."

"Hmmm, I see..." said Folmina. "But I don't think they get along quite as well as papa and my mamas."

"Hwah?! W-Well, meowbe..."

"I know how this works, you know!" Folmina said. "If mama and mama and papa get along really well, you'll make a new little brother or sister for Ghoros and me!"

"Mereow?!"

"So? When are you gonna have another kid?" For the past few months, Folmina spent a lot of time touching Rys, Belano, and Tia's pregnant bellies. She innocently reached out to touch Uliminas's flat stomach.

"Wh-When? Erm... Meow do I put this..."

"Come on! Tell me when!"

"Ah ha ha... Erm..." Even Uliminas, the onetime confederate of the Dark One and commander of the Dark Army, was at a loss before her daughter's line of questioning.

Ignoring Uliminas and Folmina's conversation, Ghozal faced Balirossa and brought his sword back to a guard. "Hey, Balirossa," he said. "You wanna get back to sword training?"

"Yes, let's." Balirossa said, getting on guard as well. "I am in your hands."

Still a knight at heart, Balirossa engaged in sword training with Ghozal nearly every day. Today was no exception, but something was off. Balirossa looked over at her husband and balked—her son Ghoros was still perched on Ghozal's head even as he stood with his sword out.

As Ghozal and Balirossa's son, the soft-spoken Ghoros was half demon royal and half human. Like his sister Folmina, whom he was extremely attached to, he regarded Balirossa and Uliminas equally as his mothers. Lately he had developed the habit of crawling atop his father's head. Despite being in his human form, Ghozal had allowed his horns to manifest. His horns were proof that he belonged to the line of Dark Ones, but right now they served the much more pragmatic function of providing something for his son to grab onto, lest he fall from his perch.

Ghoros was holding tight to Ghozal's horns, sleeping surprisingly soundly. The whole arrangement projected a very laid-back image. Balirossa smirked with self-deprecation. *I put my full effort into sword training, she thought, but I can never make Sir Ghozal so much as break a sweat, even with our son sleeping atop his head! I'm fully aware that I still have a great deal to learn, but it's vexing. I haven't been able to land a single blow on Garyl lately either...*

Ghozal seemed to notice the way Balirossa's expression had darkened. "Hrm?" he said. "What's wrong, Balirossa? Are you getting tired? Should we call it a day?"

Balirossa shook her head and returned her sword to a guard once more. "No," she said. "I'm all right. Let us continue, if you please."

Ghozal grinned. "That's the spirit!"

"Go Mama Balirossa!" Folmina cheered. "You can do it!"

Balirossa smiled at the encouragement and then launched herself towards Ghozal, fiercely swinging her sword. The sound of metal clashing against metal

filled the air as Folmina began interrogating Uliminas once more.



Sleip carried Byleri into Flio's house, past the living room, and up the stairs. He ran along at a fast clip, but the group gathered in the living room didn't even spare a glance their way.

"I have lived long and seen much of this world," Hiya said, staring intently ahead. "but I have never encountered a case of a magic doll producing offspring. I did once happen upon a book that proposed the possibility, but I understood the subject of the tale to be purely hypothetical..." They were wearing their usual outfit—nothing more than a cloth wrapped around their body.

Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, was a being with enough magic power to lay waste to the entire world. However, their power proved utterly lacking against Flio. After their defeat, they took to calling Flio "Exalted One" and joined his ever-growing household.

Next to Hiya stood Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight, just as focused on the group in front of them as Hiya. Damalynas was a master of dark magic, but she found herself defeated by Hiya, who absorbed her into their mindscape. These days, she lived inside Hiya's mental world as the djinn's adoring training partner. "No kidding," Damalynas said. "It shocks me every time I see it..."

Across from Hiya and Damalynas were three other members of Flio's house. One of them was a petite woman, and next to her was a male magic doll. The third, standing between the two, was even smaller.

"U-Um..." the woman, Belano, said, blushing and fidgeting awkwardly. Hiya and Damalynas's intense stares may have been making her uncomfortable. "Th- This is a little embarrassing..."

Belano was a witch who had once served in Balirossa's company of knights. She was a small, shy woman who could only use defensive magic. She lived at Flio's house along with the rest of her former company, and worked as a teacher at the Houghtow College of Magic.

Minilio, the magic doll, patted Belano reassuringly on the back. Flio had

created Minilio as an experiment. He looked like a younger version of Flio himself, hence the name. He had grown intimate with Belano over the course of helping her out, and they had become partners.

The child walked up to Belano from the other side Minilio and patted her on the back as well, smiling. Belano looked between the two. "Thank you, Minilio... Thank you, Belalio..."

Belalio was Minilio and Belano's child. As the child of a human and a magic doll, they were an extremely rare being. Like their father, they resembled a young Flio, but they dressed in androgynous clothes, keeping their gender ambiguous.

Belalio hugged their mother tight, happy at the words of thanks, but the gesture only made Belano's face turn from pink to bright red with embarrassment. *Awawah?! Belalio looks too much like Lord Flio!* she thought. *I get embarrassed every time they hug me! Even seeing their face gets my heart racing sometimes...*



Belano had lost her father and older brother in the war against the Dark Army. At some point, she began to think of Flio as a surrogate for both of them, but her emotions ran too strong. Before long, she became aware that she had fallen in love. Flio, however, was already married to Rys, so Belano sealed her emotions away deep within her heart, never to be disturbed.

Until, that is, Flio created a magic doll in his perfect likeness.

Belano fell in love with Minilio at first sight, and pursued a relationship with him that went far enough that the two had a child. It took everyone by surprise. After all, Belano was a late bloomer and ordinarily a shy, quiet girl.

As Belano blushed red from Belalio's hug, Minilio hugged her tight from the other side. With Belalio on one side and Minilio on the other, she grew so red that even her hands and legs—the parts of her body not covered by her clothing—became visibly flushed.

"N-No..." Belano protested. "I can't take it...!" Blood shot from her nose and she collapsed unconscious, a strangely contented smile on her face. Minilio and Belalio managed to catch her before she hit the floor, and holding her from either side, they carried her upstairs to the room the three of them shared.

"Hm." Hiya sighed, disappointed, as they watched the trio go. "I would have liked to observe them for a while longer, but I suppose it will have to wait for another time." They turned their gaze instead to the other group in the room—Calsi'im and Tia.

Calsi'im was an old skeleton warrior who had served as Dark Regent for a time, ruling in place of the Dark One Yuigarde when he went missing. He had died once before, but Flio brought him back to life, and now he was one of the many lodgers living at Flio's house. Tia, meanwhile, was a magic doll created by a mage in the Dark Army. She had ended up broken down and discarded until the fateful day that Calsi'im had discovered her and fixed her up. Ever since then, she had stayed close by his side, even following him when he took up residence with Flio.

There was a girl perched atop Calsi'im's head at the moment, her arms wrapped tight around his bony face. She was bigger than Calsi'im himself, but rode skillfully atop the skeleton with a happy smile on her face.

“Now, now, Rabbitz,” Calsi’im said with a bony grimace. “I know how much you like perching on top of my head, but I must say, it’s rather tough on my neck bones to have you up there all the time!”

Calsi’im and Tia had a daughter together named Rabbitz. The child of a skeleton and a magic doll, she was at least as rare a being as Belalio. She was a happy girl with a bright smile who loved riding on her father Calsi’im’s head.

Rabbitz looked down at Calsi’im’s face, grinning broadly. “Yah papa!” she said, nuzzling his head fondly.

“I can’t tell if this girl understands me or not...” Calsi’im muttered.

“There’s no harm in it, is there?” Tia said, smiling. “Rabbitz does such things because she loves you, Calsi’im.”

Rabbitz’s smile grew even brighter. “Yah!” she said. “Love papa! Love mama!”

Hiya and Damalynas stepped forward approaching Rabbitz, who now had her limbs wrapped around every inch of Calsi’im’s head.

“Hm...” said Hiya. “This one is half skeleton, but her body shows no sign of any skeletal attributes...”

“She doesn’t have joints like a magic doll would either...” observed Damalynas.

“Meaning that she exhibits the traits of neither parent...” Hiya pondered.

“Oh? But that isn’t what’s important, is it?” said Tia, smiling at the two of them. “All that matters is that Rabbitz is the fruit of my love with Calsi’im.” Tia pet Rabbitz on the head. The girl closed her eyes, a happy look on her face.



Blossom, the former heavy fighter in Balirossa’s knightly company, watched the events in the living room from the kitchen after bringing vegetables in. She was Balirossa’s best friend, and naturally quit the knighthood with her as did Belano and Byleri. Originally from a farming family herself, Blossom had a very high degree of agricultural acumen, and had put it to work cultivating a large farm located on Flio’s estate.

“That was quite a dang old bit of love talk to walk in on...” she said, wincing

and scratching the back of her head. “Can you believe that Balirossa and Byleri and Belano all have kids now? Somehow, I’m the only one still left single. At this rate, I’m worried my old pa from back home is gonna start showing up to talk about arranged marriages!”

Blossom laughed to herself as she set the basket full of vegetables down on the floor.

“Grh-a-hem!” Hokh’hokton, the goblin helping Blossom with the vegetable basket, cleared his throat. “Lady Blossom, perhaps you have forgotten a certain someone?” he continued, striking a pose.

Hokh’hokton had originally been a soldier in the Dark Army, along with his companion Maunty, but now the two of them lived and worked on Blossom’s farm. But unlike Maunty, who had a large family, Hokh’hokton was single.

“Hm?” Blossom asked, a genuinely puzzled look on her face. “And who might that be?”

Hokh’hokton slicked his hair back. “Grh-a-hem! Lady Blossom, behold! Before your eyes is a most alluring, *very* single goblin!”

“Huh?” said Blossom, looking all around. “What on Klyrode are you talking about?”

“What? I-I said, before your eyes is—”

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” Blossom cut Hokh’hokton off with a very forced laugh. “Well, that’s enough kidding around! Let’s hurry up and bring in the rest of these veggies!” She went back out the door to get another basket from the cart outside, completely ignoring the goblin’s determined posing.

“Y-Yes, ma’am...” Hokh’hokton muttered gloomily as he followed along.

It was another busy day at the ever-growing household.

◇Later—Silkfleece Cloth Emporium◇

After taking her time looking over the merchandise Silkfleece had on offer, Rys came up to Fetabetcz with a roll of brightly colored knit cloth in her hands and handed it to the proprietress. “Excuse me, Miss Fetabetcz, would you happen to have more cloth like this?”

“Well, well,” Fetabetcz said, resting her chin against her hand and examining Rys’s selection. “You’ve picked out quite the interesting piece, madame.” She turned towards Lil-Lil, the shop’s head clerk, and beckoned her over from the back of the shop where she was checking over the paperwork and inventory. “Hey Lil-Lil, come here a sec!”

Lil-Lil’s outfit was as over-the-top as you can imagine—a frilly, poofy dress accompanied by some truly gaudy jewelry. She skipped over to Fetabetcz “Right away! How can I help you, Lady Fetabetcz?”

Fetabetcz gestured at the cloth Rys had picked out. “That’s one of the products we got from that foreign merchant the other day, right? We got any more in storage?”

“Well, lemme see...” Lil-Lil brought her face in close, getting a good look at the cloth before spreading her arms and shrugging her shoulders apologetically. “Y’know, we’d never stocked merchandise from that merchant before, so we only bought a small supply to see how it’d sell. I think that might be the last of it...”

“I see...” said Rys, touching a finger to her lips in an expression of disappointment. “That is a pity. I really am very fond of that cloth...”

Fetabetcz lowered her head. “That cloth is made of top-quality materials for sure, but the pattern is just a bit too...colorful? Or maybe the word is *unique*. Either way, it’s not the sort of thing that’s in style in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. I didn’t think it would be popular for making clothes out of, and I couldn’t think of very many other plausible uses either. Although, I gotta say, I do find it very striking.”

While Rys and Fetabetcz went on discussing the cloth, Flio held out one hand towards the cloth and stared up at the ceiling. “The merchant who sold you the cloth...” he started. “Did he travel west after meeting you?”

“Huh?” said Fetabetcz. “Y-Yeah, that’s right. He told me he was headed across the Western Desert to some place called Indol. I bet he went that way after we finished our business together.”

“I see...” said Flio. “Then there’s probably still time.”

“Still time? What do you mean by that?” Fetabetz smirked. “Don’t tell me you’re planning on going after ’em! It’s been a while since they stopped here. I know the Fli-o’-Rys General Store has the fastest wagons around, but there’s no way you’d catch up to him now, especially with the desert in your way! Not unless you had one of those experimental Enchanted Frigates I hear they got in Klyrode Castle these days...”

“Thank you for the advice,” Flio said with his usual smile. “But my wife really seems taken by this cloth, and fortunately it sounds like the merchant still has lots more in their cart. I’ll just have to do what I can.”

“M-My lord husband!” said Rys, suddenly bashful. “You’d do that for me?”

Flio’s smile brightened as he turned to his wife. “You’re always doing so much for the family, Rys. I’d be happy to get the cloth for you. Honestly, it’s the least I can do.”

“My lord husband...” Rys hugged Flio tight, her cheeks blushing pink. Flio gently petted her on the head.

“I cast a Search spell looking for any trace of this cloth,” Flio said. “Just like Miss Fetabetz told us, there’s a whole bunch in a wagon traveling through the desert. Let’s head there at once!” He handed Fetabetz her payment.

“Hold on a moment!” Fetabetz cried out, stopping him. “I think you overpaid...”

“Not at all!” said Flio. “Just consider it thanks for all the help.”

“You’ve helped us out just as much, you know,” said Fetabetz. “With your wagons, we’ve been able to ship our products anywhere we like in just a— Huh?!” Suddenly, she realized that Flio and Rys had already left the shop. She poked her head out, but there was no sign of the couple anywhere.

“Hey, Lil-Lil,” she said, tilting her head in confusion. “Did you see where the lovebirds went?”

“No...” said Lil-Lil, following suit. “I don’t even sense their presence...”

◇A Few Hours Later—The Western Desert◇

Wyne flew through the air in her fully draconic form, Flio and Rys riding on

her back as they made their way over the desert that lay to the far west of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode.

Flio had used his Teleportation spell to travel straight home from Osahka. Teleportation allowed the caster to return to any location they had visited previously. Since Flio had never been to the Western Desert, he headed home first to plan his next move. He consulted the map, and decided his best option would be to use the spell Fly to travel over the desert, when Wyne suddenly burst into the room. She was hiding from Tanya, who was still trying to force her to wear undergarments.

“Dada? Mama?” she said. “Are you going on a trip-trip?”

“That’s right,” said Flio. “We were just about to head out to the Western Desert.”

“The Western Desert?” Wyne echoed. “I used to go there lots-lots when I was in the Dark Army! Lemme take you! Lemme, lemme!” Without waiting for a response, she flew back outside and transformed into a wyvern.

“I suppose we might as well!” said Flio. And so, he and Rys got on Wyne’s back, and the three of them set out west.

“You sure are fast, huh, Wyne!” Flio grinned as he watched the desert race by underneath them. “Still...” he added, wrapping an arm around Rys’s waist to make sure she didn’t fall off. “You *could* afford to slow down a tad...”

Rys blushed as she leaned into her husband’s arms, enjoying the feeling of his arm around her body for all she was worth. *It’s like a date with my husband in the sky...* she thought, nuzzling dreamily against his cheek. *What a wonderful afternoon this has been!* She was so happy that her lupine tail materialized and began wagging furiously.

“Don’t worry-worry about a thing!” Wyne said cheerfully. “I can fly anywhere in one go, whether it’s the sea in the south, or the islands in the east, or the snowfields in the north, or the desert in the west!” Her enormous wings beat harder still as she accelerated to greater and greater speeds.

On her back, Flio called up a window, displaying a map of the desert. He glanced between it and the terrain beneath them. “It looks like the signal from the cloth is just a bit farther ahead...”

◇Meanwhile—Somewhere in the Western Desert◇

A single large wagon made its way west through the vast expanse of desert, pulled along not by horses but by a local animal with a hump on its back, known in this world as a camule. Camules had uncommonly large hooves, which enabled them to walk along banks of sand without sinking in, making them a godsend to merchants who intended to cross the desert.

There were two people driving the wagon—a man and a woman, both rather short of stature and wearing ponchos with the hoods up to shield their faces from the sun. The woman sighed as they drove along, letting go of the reins with one hand to wipe the sweat from her brow. “It’s another hot day, but we need to do our best to make it through the desert before we get caught in a sandstorm...” she said. “Master, can I trust you to keep an eye out for sand centipedes?”

The woman, a high elf by the name of Luna, looked young, but she was in fact over a hundred and fifty years old. Her companion was a human man named Esto.

“Sure, of course!” said Esto. “Leave the lookout to me!” He leaned his small body over the edge of the wagon to peer out.

The scorched sands all around them were unbearably hot. It seemed like it was never going to let up. Before long, the two were at their limits of exhaustion.

“I know there’s no way to reach the Magic Kingdom of Klyrode without passing through the desert...” Esto griped, wiping his brow. “But this heat really is the worst...”

“Now, now, Master,” said Luna, offering Esto the waterskin she wore on her belt. “With our business concluded, we’ll be home before we know it. You’ll be able to rest very soon.”

Esto took the waterskin and leaned his head back, greedily swallowing as

much water as he could before heaving a deep sigh. “You sure don’t seem bothered by any of it,” he said. “We made that whole monthlong journey to the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode ’cause we’d been having a tough time of things back in Indol, but even though we went all the way to Klyrode Castle Town and Osahka—the kingdom’s biggest merchant city—the most business we got was that Silkfleece shop buying a few of our pieces. And now we’re returning home without even selling most of our merchandise, y’know? I don’t expect we’ll be able to sell it in Indol either. We’re going home without even recouping the cost of all this cloth! Feels like the whole trip was a waste...”

Esto sighed again, his expression darkening still further. *I was sure the cloth I picked out this time would sell...* he thought to himself. *Maybe my business sense isn’t that good after all...*

Luna, however, smiled and patted Esto on the back. “Alas, the world can often be cruel. But Master, I can promise you that your merchandise is all truly excellent. Some of the people who see that sample of your cloth will surely recognize its value. Your lucky break is just around the corner—of that, I am certain!” she said, her voice full of cheer.

Esto couldn’t help smiling a bit himself at the sight of Luna’s happy face. “You and your relentless positivity,” he muttered. *I bet Luna’s just as down in the dumps as me about no one buying the cloth... She’s probably just putting on a brave face to try and cheer me up. I guess I can’t mope around forever, though...*

With that thought, he went back to his position keeping lookout for potential dangers.

“Quite right!” Luna nodded, smiling and patting Esto on the shoulder. “Smile, and good fortune will come to your door! And customers, as well!”

Just then, without warning, an immense shadow fell over the wagon and the surrounding desert.

“What in the world?” cried Luna.

“What the heck?!” exclaimed Esto.

The two exchanged a glance, looked up at the sky, and screamed in panic.

“Wh-What the heeeeck?!”

“Wh-What in the woooooorld?!”

In the sky, high above them, was an enormous red-scaled wyvern, flying over their wagon.

“W-W-W-Wyvern!” Esto shrieked.

“N-No!” cried Luna. “I don’t want to be eaten!”

Esto and Luna held each other tight, shaking with sheer terror in each other’s arms. The camules, sensing danger, took off at a desperate run. The wyvern, however, was faster. It sped ahead of them and plowed into the dunes headfirst, kicking up a cloud of hot desert sand and shaking the ground enough to make the wagon nearly fall over.

“E-Eeeeeek!” the two merchants cried, not letting go of the other for a second.

A moment of silence passed, and then the wyvern suddenly stuck its head out from underneath the sand. Esto and Luna’s eyes went wide when they saw what was happening.

“Huh?!”

“Th-That’s...!”

In the wyvern’s mouth was a particularly massive sand centipede. It tossed the enormous insect into the air and caught it once more, chomping it to bits and gulping it down with gusto. In just a minute, it had devoured the creature whole.

“G-Goodness!” marveled Luna. “Incredible...”

“Sand centipedes are some of the most dangerous things in the desert, and the dragon ate it up like *that...*” Esto marveled in awe.

The wyvern gave a large, satisfied *buuurp*, sending out a gout of flame from its maw.

Esto and Luna could only watch, unable to move from the spot as the wyvern lowered its head before them. A man and woman jumped down from its neck and walked up to Esto and Luna, who were still trembling together in the driver’s seat of the wagon.

“Excuse me,” the man said, an easygoing smile on his face despite the situation. In his hand was the cloth they had sold as a sample at the Silkfleece Emporium. “Would you, by any chance, be the merchants who sold this bit of cloth to a shop in Osahka?”

Esto and Luna glanced at the cloth, then back at each other, and then over at the newcomer. They looked supremely puzzled.

“Y-Yes...” said Luna. “I do believe that is one of ours...”

“We sold that in Osahka, yeah...” agreed Esto.



“I see,” Esto said, smiling at the man sitting across from him. “So you tracked us down all this way to buy our cloth?” Flio had prepared a set of chairs for them and had conjured a giant hemispherical plate in the air above them to serve as a parasol so that they could sit down for a leisurely business discussion. He even cast some sort of cooling spell on the entire area for perfect comfort, even though they were in the middle of the desert.

This Flio person is incredible... Esto thought. Conjuring protection from the sun is one thing, but I’ve never heard of a spell that can cool down the desert like this! And he makes it look as natural as breathing... But... He glanced behind Flio, at Wyne.

Wyne had transformed from her wyvern form back to a human, and was now sprawled out on the ground, lounging in the shade Flio had created. “Ahhh!” she cried. “So cool-cool!”

He even has a dragonewt who can devour a sand centipede like it’s nothing working for him! Esto thought. He really is incredible, that Flio...

Rys, meanwhile, was inside the wagon, busying herself looking over Esto’s inventory. “It’s perfect! Just like I imagined!” she rhapsodized. “I’ve hardly ever *seen* such splendid cloth for sale!”

“You have a good eye, madame!” said Luna, cheerful as ever.

Rys’s eyes were practically shining with delight at the sight of the cloth. She had finally found what she was looking for. Luna brought out cloth after cloth

for her, holding them out for her and draping pieces over her body. Each piece seemed to make Rys more excited than the last.

“Each one of these textiles was hand-selected by my husband Esto to absolutely exacting standards,” Luna said, puffing out her chest with pride. “I’m very pleased that you’ve taken such a great liking to them!”

“U-Um... Luna?” said Esto, wincing awkwardly. He had overheard the conversation from outside the wagon. “You just kinda showed up uninvited at my shop one day. I know we started living and working together at some point, but we aren’t actually *married* or anything...”

Luna, however, was deeply engrossed in her sales pitch and in far too good of a mood to hear Esto’s objections.

Flio chuckled a little to himself. *He says that, but he trusts her enough to let her handle Rys*, he thought, looking over the scene with his usual relaxed smile.

“Excuse me, Wyne, come here for a moment!” Rys said, poking her head out of the wagon. “I want to test out a few of these fabrics!”

“Okay, mama! Be right-right there!” Wyne said, hurrying over with a big smile on her face. Flio watched her disappear into the wagon and then turned his attention back to Esto.

“Shall the two of us unwind for a moment, perhaps?” he offered, taking a flask from his Bottomless Bag.

“Ah, much obliged...” said Esto, politely accepting.

“My wife seems to love your merchandise,” Flio said, smiling as ever. “I’m glad we came all the way after you.”

“I can’t tell you how glad I am to hear that,” said Esto, smiling happily himself. “We tried to sell our cloth to shops all over the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, but nobody at all was interested in buying it. It was starting to make me wonder if I had lost my eye for quality...” He chuckled, clearly embarrassed, and awkwardly scratched the back of his neck.

Flio placed a hand on Esto’s shoulder. “I actually run a general store myself,” he began. “I know how difficult this business can be. There’s been lots of times

where we stocked a lot of something, thinking it would be a good item, only for it to not sell at all. And sometimes it's the other way around. But..." he looked Esto straight in the eyes. "If you know an item is good from the bottom of your heart, there's sure to be someone else out there who will see what you see in it as well. That's what I believe." *Or at least, he thought, still smiling his easygoing smile, that's what the president of the Spades Mercantile Association used to say when I worked there back in my home world!*

Esto nodded to himself as he mulled over Flio's words. *There's sure to be someone else out there who will see what I see in it...*

"Excuse me, my lord husband..." said Rys, poking her head out from the wagon again. She suddenly sounded shy. "Could I borrow you for a moment...?" Behind her were Wyne and Luna, each wearing a cloth wrapped around their bodies.

"Yes, Rys? What is it?" Flio asked, standing up and walking over. Rys leaned forward and whispered something in his ear. Flio nodded, the same smile plastered on his face, and went back to speak to Esto.

"Mister Esto," he said, "as it turns out, my wife is very taken with your cloth."

"I see," Esto said. "I'm very glad to hear that."

"Would it be too much trouble," Flio went on, "if we wanted to purchase your entire stock?"

"Well, of course!" Esto began, his business smile plastered on his face. Then, a second later, his brain caught up to the conversation. "W-Wait, what? Mister Flio...*what* did you just say?" His body went stiff—he must have misunderstood, he felt.

"My wife is the most selfless person you can imagine," Flio said. "She never asks for anything for herself, you know. But she told me she wants your cloth no matter what. That's just how wonderful the items you selected are."

Slowly, Esto's face broke out in an enormous grin. "I-I see! Thank you very much! Really, thank you, from the bottom of my heart!"

Luna's grin was just as big as Esto's. She flashed him double peace signs, signaling victory, from behind Rys's back. "I'm sure my sales pitch helped win

her over as well!" she cheered. "Aren't you glad to have such a hard worker for a wife, Master?"

Esto scratched the back of his neck again "I told you, we're not married! You're just an employee at my store! Although..." he added, mumbling half under his breath. "You *are* very important to me..."

Flio couldn't help smiling to himself at Esto and Luna's relationship.

For a while, the desert was full of happy voices.

◇That Night—Flio's House◇

After dinner, Rys stood in the living room, a bright smile on her face. "I made these clothes as soon as I got home with the fabric my lord husband bought," she said. "What do you think?"

"I love it!" said Elinàsze. "It's so cute!"

"This clothing is amazing, mother!" Rynàsze agreed. Both sisters were grinning cheerfully as they looked over the colorful clothes their mother had made for them.

"They really are excellent, Auntie Rys!" said Rislei, who was standing a ways behind Elinàsze and Rynàsze.

"Quite right!" said Sleip, smiling as well. "My Rislei looks cuter than ever in such a phenomenally adorable little outfit!"

"Like, totally, right?" said Byleri. "Everyone looks so good in their new clothes..." She was smiling too, but there was just a hint of exhaustion in her voice.

"Mama, look!" said Wyne. "Mine's super-super cute-cute!" She jumped up and down in her new poncho, exposing the underneath and revealing that, true to form, she had once again gone without underwear.

"Young Mistress Wyne!" Tanya shouted, springing to action immediately. "How many times must I tell you?! You *must* wear your undergarments!"

"No way!" Wyne protested, fleeing from Tanya and the panties in her outstretched hand. "I hate-hate underwear!" Tanya chased after her, and before long, the two were running in circles around the living room.

“Wow! So cute!” said Folmina, spinning in place in her new outfit with a great big grin on her face.

“Yeah...” said Ghoros, bashfully watching her spin. “You’re really cute, big sis Folmina...”

“Y’know what? I think this outfit makes me look stronger!” said Garyl, posing in front of the big mirror in the living room. Belario was standing beside him, copying his every move.

“I’m sure our little Rabbitz looks quite adorable in her new clothes as well!” said Calsi’im. “But alas!” Try as he might, he couldn’t get a good look at the girl —after all, she was still tightly clinging to his head.

“Love papa!” Rabbitz chirped, beaming as she rubbed her cheeks against Calsi’im’s.

“Hee hee!” Tia giggled as she watched. “You look lovely, Rabbitz! And you too, Calsi’im!”

Rys smiled happily, listening to the chorus of cheerful voices that filled the living room as the children tried on their new clothes. “I still have plenty of cloth left,” she said. “I’m going to try making all sorts of different things for everyone!” In fact, she had a length of cloth in her hands as she spoke, working on yet another new outfit even now.

Balirossa, Belano, and Uliminas watched Rys work with great interest.

“That’s lady Rys for mew,” said Uliminas. “Her skills are so amewzing that it’s almost unfair...”

Belano nodded quietly.

“She couldn’t cook a mewl to save her life when we were in the Dark Army,” Uliminas went on. “And now she’s a purrfect seamstress on top of everything else...”

“Not at all!” said Rys. “I’m sure any of you could learn to do this if you wanted. Why don’t you come help me sew?”

“Truly, Lady Rys?” exclaimed Balirossa. “I-In that case, I would like to try my hand at making an outfit for Ghoros...”

“A-And maybe I could make something for Minilio and Belalio...” Belano added.

“I don’t know if I’ve got the patience for it...” said Uliminas. “But...I suppose trying it meownce wouldn’t hurt...”

Ghozal folded his arms as he watched the scene play out. “Hrm...” he grunted. “Hey, Hiya and Damalynas. Do you two ever think of trying on some different outfits?”

“I’m afraid I must decline, although I appreciate the sentiment behind the offer,” Hiya bowed, wearing a polite smile on their face. “I am fond of my own clothing, you understand...”

“I’m just a psychic projection, you know,” said Damalynas, smirking and resting her hands on the back of her head. “But this outfit is proof that I reached the highest mastery of the dark arts and became the successor to the name ‘Damalynas.’”

Flio looked over the cheerful scene in the living room with his usual easygoing smile. *I’d love to be able to get regular shipments of that cloth, he thought, but it takes their wagon an entire month to make the trip from Indol to the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, one way. With our demon horses, we could probably make the trip in half that time, or we could use an Enchanted Frigate...but the one Enchanted Frigate we have is a symbol of peace between humanity and the Dark Army now. It’s busy making round trips from Klyrode Castle Town to Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park...*

As Flio was lost in thought, Sybe, in its unicorn rabbit form, came up and tapped him on his leg. “Hm? What’s the matter, Sybe?” Flio asked, stooping down to Sybe’s eye level. Sybe looked very pleased with itself—around its neck it wore a scarf Rys had made for it out of the new cloth. “Of course!” Flio said as if the rabbit had spoken to him, smiling and giving the critter a thumbs-up. “It looks great on you!”

Sybe gave a “*snuffle!*” of delight.

Everyone stayed up late that evening, chatting into the night.

◇Klyrode Castle—The Maiden Queen’s Office◇

Holed up in her office in Klyrode Castle, the Maiden Queen worried away at the paperwork, heedless of the increasingly late hour. Ever since she had taken the throne from her father, who had used his position as king for his own selfish gain, she had been working diligently for the good of the people. With her ceaseless dedication and strong sense of justice, she had quickly earned the adoration of her people, but at the cost of endless days of worry and fatigue.

The Maiden Queen scrutinized every last inch of the papers she had been given to review, writing detailed instructions wherever it seemed appropriate. This work had kept her up night after night with no respite in sight.

It hasn't been quite as bad lately, since the Third Princess began handling financial paperwork, but it's still just so much... She shook her head. *No, I mustn't complain about my duties...* she thought, glancing back at the pile of paperwork.

One note in particular caught her eye. She picked it up. "This is from...the Second Princess?" Double-checking to make sure she hadn't misread her sister's name, the Maiden Queen began reading over the contents.

Leusoc, the Second Princess, was the social butterfly of the family and had such talents the Maiden Queen had put to use as an envoy to neighboring kingdoms.

"Signs of unrest in Indol..." the Queen read. "And she wants material support in case of an emergency." She sighed heavily as she finished the report. "It takes an entire month to send soldiers to Indol," she said, furrowing her brows as she thought. "And it's too long of a distance for our mages to cross with a single casting of Teleportation. Besides, from the sound of things, the situation is still short of outright hostilities. Dispatching a company of knights might only make things worse..."

The peace treaty with the Dark Army had been a godsend, but there were still enough problems to deal with that the Maiden Queen sometimes wanted nothing more than to clutch her head and scream.

Suddenly, something on the Maiden Queen's left hand began to flash with light. She hastily removed the long white glove she was wearing, exposing a ring. Her face lit up with delight. After quickly fixing her hair and checking her

appearance to make sure nothing was out of place, she touched the magic gem embedded in the ring, and a projection of a certain someone's upper body appeared in the air in front of her.

"Garyl!" the Maiden Queen exclaimed happily. "Good evening!"

"Good evening, Miss Ellie!" Garyl replied. "Is now a good time?"

"Yes, we can talk," the Maiden Queen said, beaming happily.

Flio had created this ring for the Maiden Queen, knowing that she was often too busy to visit Garyl. Its embedded gem was enchanted with a communication spell, enabling her to speak with the owner of its partner ring. Previous gems of this sort were not good enough to really allow for a proper conversation, but Flio had improved on the artifacts that had come before until he had forged a gem that allowed its holder to see their interlocutor's face and communicate easily.

The Maiden Queen looked like a completely different person from the grim-faced woman who had been poring over paperwork just moments ago. She was smiling with delight, her cheeks flushed pink as she spoke.

"My mother made us all new clothes today," Garyl said. "Can you see my outfit?"

"The one you're wearing right now? Yes, I can! It looks splendid on you!"

Garyl chatted happily as the Maiden Queen watched with a smile on her face. If it weren't for these chats with Garyl, she wasn't sure if she would ever get through her work.



Boralis went to knock on the Maiden Queen's office door but stopped herself when she heard cheerful voices coming from inside. As the captain of the royal guard, Boralis was a formidable knight responsible for the Queen's personal safety. She was a woman with gorgeous features who favored men's uniforms. As you might imagine, she was quite a bit more popular with women than men.

Her Majesty sounds happy, Boralis thought. She must be speaking with Garyl. Boralis knew full well how important the beleaguered Queen's conversations

with Garyl were for her well-being. She stepped away from the door and silently waited for them to finish. *My business isn't urgent. No harm in waiting until they're done.*

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

The Dark One Dawkson stood on the veranda of his throne room, gazing out towards the Dark Citadel's gates. Dawkson had once been a tyrannical ruler by the name of Yuigarde, but he ended up traveling with Hero Gold-Hair's party for a time and grew spiritually as a person. He changed his name to Dawkson, and dedicated himself to working for the good of demonkind, not neglecting even the smallest matter. Every day, more and more demons were coming around to a favorable view of his conduct.

"Master," came a voice, as Phufun stepped up from behind him. Phufun was a succubus, and Dawkson's aide and minion. She had been his loyal right hand even before he had taken the throne. She was also, incidentally, a masochist.

"What's up, Phufun?" said Dawkson. "Something wrong?"

Phufun pressed her glasses up the ridge of her nose. "I received word from the Infernal Lady Coqueshtti that she will be departing the Dark Citadel for a time in order to deliver our present to the former Dark Regent Lord Calsi'im and his wife Lady Tia, in celebration of their firstborn child. That is all."

"I see..." Dawkson nodded his head. "I wish I could visit and give 'em the present myself, but I've been up to my eyeballs with meetings and stuff lately..."

"I understand your feelings," said Phufun, nodding in agreement and adjusting her glasses again. "We have much work to do to bring the demons who still haven't accepted our peace treaty with the humans around to our way of thinking..."

"Yeah," said Dawkson. "But hold that thought for a second. Look at *that*, Phufun!" He turned back towards the window, pointing to the citadel gates.

"The front gate has gotten quite busy, hasn't it...?" Phufun mused.

"No kidding. Just about everyone is abandoning the old Dark Citadel Shopping Town to set up shop here."

“It’s as if we’ve ended up with a new shopping town next to our front gates,” Phufun said. “And it seems to be well received. The old Dark Citadel Shopping Town was run by a shady conglomerate that made the shopkeepers pay illegal operation fees, but the new one is built around the Fli-o’-Rys Dark Citadel Branch Store, and they don’t charge anything at all. They even offered to donate a portion of their proceeds to the Dark Citadel itself. And with Fli-o’-Rys setting the example, the rest of the merchants seem to have followed suit.”

“It’s been pretty good for our finances, yeah?”

“Indeed,” Phufun agreed. “Thanks to them, we haven’t had any difficulties paying the salaries of the demons working at the Citadel for a while now.” Dawkson gave a satisfied nod at Phufun’s words. “Incidentally, Master...” Phufun continued, turning to face Dawkson. “Shall we discuss our little...*issue*?”

The Dark One furrowed his brow. “*That*, huh...” he murmured. “You mean the bastards who’ve been kidnapping demons to use in their experiments? Have you learned anything?”

“My deepest apologies,” said Phufun, “but we still don’t have any promising leads...”

“I see...” Dawkson sighed. “That’s a damn shame. Keep up with your investigation, all right?”

Phufun twitched slightly at Dawkson’s words. Back when he had gone by the name Yuigarde, her master would have bellowed something like, “*Whaddaya mean you don’t got any leads?! Useless idiot!*” and sent her flying with his fists.

Master Dawkson really has been like a different person ever since he returned from his travels... Phufun thought, nodding to herself. *But sometimes I do wish he would hit me like he used to...*

Her cheeks turned red at that last thought. Dawkson’s minion Phufun was, after all, an inveterate masochist.

◇Dark Citadel Shopping Town◇

The Dark Citadel Shopping Town was located a fair ways away from the Dark Citadel itself. There, in what had once been the busiest pleasure quarter in all of the Dark One’s territory, three figures walked the empty streets.

The robust man in the middle of the trio trembled. “What... What happened here?” he choked out.

The two women walking on either side of him seemed utterly at a loss. “I-I really couldn’t tell you...” lamented the one in the gold cheongsam.

“I don’t understand anything anymore...” agreed the one in the silver cheongsam.

Just a few months ago, this had been a bustling town, packed full of demons coming and going from the many shops. Now, however, it looked like little more than ruins.

“But...” the man said, unable to stop his lips from shaking. “This was our largest source of income!”

This man was none other than the Shadow King, head of the Shadow Conglomerate. He had once been the king of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Back then, he had used his position as monarch to engage in all sorts of illicit enterprises, but after he was forcibly removed from the throne, he made the black market his main line of business.

“This is bad, isn’t it, Gintsuno?” said the woman in gold.

“Yes, Kintsuno,” said the woman in silver. “It seems very bad...” The two exchanged a worried look.

The demon fox sisters, Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver, once ruled over the demons to the west, but since losing their positions, they joined forces with the Shadow King, hoping to rise back up to a position of power through the criminal underworld. They had even once plotted together to seize the throne of the Dark One, only for their schemes to end in failure.

As the three stared dumbfounded, a slender man came running up to them from behind, shouting, “Shadow King!” and kneeling.

“Hm,” the Shadow King muttered as he tried to recall who this person was. “Oh, that’s right! You’re the dark elf I left in charge of the Shopping Town, aren’t you? What in the devil’s name happened here?!”

“W-Well...” the dark elf began, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. “Do

you recall the human shop that opened a branch store in front of the Dark Citadel?”

“I do...” said the Shadow King. “Wasn’t that just a small fry from some backwater town? Houghtow, wasn’t it?”

“Y-Yes, that’s the one. They started inviting local shopkeepers to set up business in front of the Dark Citadel. Before we knew what was happening, almost everyone had already left...” The elf held produced a bag and handed it over. Gintsuno took it and looked inside, clicking her tongue in disappointment.

“Then why don’t we go wipe that meddlesome shop off the face of the earth?” she yipped, extending her claws as her fox tail materialized on her back, bristling furiously.

“W-We tried!” the dark elf manager protested. “But...”

“I’m afraid we can’t let you do that.” Suddenly, a group of people emerged from the streets behind. They were wearing black, and had wolf masks covering their faces.

“Wh-Who are you lot?” the Shadow King demanded.

“We are the Justice Legion, under the command of the Wolf of Justice. The Fli-o’-Rys General Store and their affiliates are under our protection!” The members of the Justice Legion readied their various weapons.

“I-It’s *them*!” The dark elf shouted, pointing a trembling finger in the Justice Legion’s direction. “They’re always getting in our way!”

“Underlings of the Wolf of Justice...” Kintsuno muttered. “This may be too hot for us to handle...”

“W-We’re doomed...” Gintsuno agreed.

The fox sisters drew back, beads of nervous sweat dripping down their faces.

“She who fights and runs away...” Kintsuno began.

“Lives to fight another day!” yipped Gintsuno. The two transformed into their demon fox forms—gold-and silver-furred, of course—and fled full tilt. Kintsuno grabbed the Shadow King in her mouth, while Gintsuno took the dark elf.

“You won’t get away!” The Justice Legion gave chase.

In truth, the Justice Legion was none other than the latest form of the Silent Listeners, an elite corps of shadow demons who once served as the Dark Army’s intelligence apparatus under the direct command of Uliminas. Their current head was the shadow demon Greanyl. When Uliminas left the Dark Army, the Silent Listeners quit as well. Eventually, they found work as employees of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

“I’ll get you this time, Shadow King! And the demon fox sisters too!” Greanyl declared through clenched teeth as she ran for all she was worth. The fox sisters fled desperately before her.

The Shadow King grumbled from his position in Kintsuno’s jaws, craning his neck to try to get a look at the Justice Legion. “Damnation! At this rate, we might have to give up on the Dark Citadel Shopping Town entirely. Maybe we should try making money in some other kingdom...”

The Justice Legion pursued the fleeing foxes as the chase led out of the shopping town and into the forest.

Chapter 2: Are These Goddesses Useful for Anything?! (Descent of the No-Goddess)

◇Flio's House—Workshop◇

Behind Flio's house outside Houghtow City stood a three-story wooden building that served as a workshop. It was there that Flio, Hiya, Damalynas, and the rest developed and produced magic items to sell at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. At present, Flio was meeting with a woman on the workshop's second floor.

"Here you go," he said, handing over a paper bag. Inside was a quantity of powder. "That's all the medicine I synthesized this time."

"I thank you most graciously," said the woman. This was Zofina, an angel and disciple of the Celestial Plane. She took the bag of powder and bowed deeply.

Flio bowed his head apologetically. "I'm very sorry that I wasn't able to prepare very much this time."

"D-Don't be ridiculous!" said Zofina. "Even we celestials would struggle to make medicine out of a Beast of Disaster's bones. I can't tell you how pleased the goddesses have been with your regular shipments, Mister Flio. You have a rare ability."

"Hm?" Flio blinked. "The goddesses? I remember you telling me that there wasn't enough for everyone on the Celestial Plane who wanted this medicine, but the goddesses haven't been keeping it all to themselves, have they?"

"A-Ah," Zofina corrected herself, doing her best to keep a straight face. "Excuse me, I misspoke. Not only the goddesses, but all of us on the Celestial Plane are pleased with your efforts."

This medicine Flio had invented had a powerful healing effect on the humans, demons, and demihumans of Klyrode alike. It seemed that it worked on the people of the Celestial Plane as well. It even had the effect of rejuvenating the imbiber's skin, making them look years younger than their true age. It was that

property in particular that made it so desirable to the goddesses. Zofina had been getting mobbed by desperate goddesses day after day, begging for a portion of the drug or demanding to know when she was getting her hands on more.

In addition to monetary compensation, the goddesses had given Flio free rein to enter Dogorogma, a world in the subaltern plane in which only celestials could ordinarily set foot. There, he could hunt all the magic beasts he liked to make into ingredients for his concoctions.

That was close! Zofina thought. *If Mister Flio finds out the goddesses are using all of the medicine for their own beautification, he surely won't want to make it anymore...*

"I-I suppose I will take my leave," she said. "I'll see you again in ten days' time."

"All right," said Flio. "I'll try to have more for you next time you come."

Zofina conjured a scythe in her left hand and swung it once, cutting a gap in space itself. She bowed once more and took her leave, the gap closing behind her as she vanished.

Hiya, who had been watching the exchange from the room's entrance, had a cool smile on their face. "Madame Zofina believes we are in the dark, I think," they said. "As if we don't know what those goddesses are using that medicine for..."

"Well, it is what it is," said Flio. "But really, I never would have dreamed that I'd have goddesses disguising themselves as humans visiting my shop..."

Indeed, some of the goddesses who had been unable to get the coveted powder from Zofina sent their own angels or other familiars, or even went themselves to try to procure some of the precious substance from its source. Zofina had been doing her best to keep an eye on them and prevent them from mobbing Flio like they had done so with her, but there was only so much she could do.

Tanya, who had just stepped inside the room with a pot of tea, sighed when she heard what Flio and Hiya had been talking about. "Lately there have been

more and more goddesses or their familiars disguising themselves as humans to try to sneak their way into the line for medicine at Fli-o-Rys,” she said. “It’s becoming a bit of a problem...”

“Goddesses of the Celestial Plane are still women, after all,” said Hiya, accepting a cup of tea from Tanya with an amused smirk. “They wish to remain beautiful for all time, just as any human woman would.”

Flio couldn’t help smirking as well. “Well, be that as it may, as long as they follow the rules, I don’t mind turning a bit of a blind eye...” He took a sip of tea, and gave Hiya and Tanya one of his usual easygoing smiles. “More importantly, I’m running out of materials to synthesize the medicine. I’ll need to plan another hunting trip soon. I have a few other things I want from Dogorogma too.”

“Other than the medicine, you mean?” Tanya asked, cocking her head.

“Yes, I do. In fact...” Flio began, but then he suddenly stopped, sensing a presence. He turned to look out the window and saw a woman with feathered angel wings flying in midair. “Oh,” he said, smirking once more. “If it isn’t Miss Telbyress again.”

Hiya pursed their lips into a scowl. “Goddess or no, if that woman causes you any trouble, Exalted One...”

“Then we shall show her her place,” Tanya finished, conjuring her own scythe as a pair of angel wings appeared on her back. Her one inhuman eye glinted with a deadly light.

The woman outside—Telbyress—shook her head rapidly from side to side. “No, no, this isn’t about that!” she said. “I didn’t come all this way just to cut in line for the drug! I actually have a completely unrelated request!”

Telbyress was a goddess, one of those who had been so enamored of the medicine’s effect that she had traced Zofina’s steps all the way back and discovered Flio. She had asked Flio time and time again if he would sell it to her directly, ahead of all the other goddesses. Flio, however, had refused to entertain her request. “*I promised Zofina that she would handle distribution on the Celestial Plane,*” he’d said. “*She’s the only one of you I’ll sell to.*”



“P-Perhaps we can negotiate for the medicine some other time,” Telbyress said, stepping into the room as Flio followed her with his gaze, his arms folded. “But that isn’t why I’ve come to you today.”

So she hasn’t given up on the drug after all, Flio thought, smirking to himself. “I’ve already explained the matter to you. There isn’t really any room for discussion.” Flio cleared his throat. “Well, never mind that. What is this request of yours?”

“Um...” Telbyress started, stumbling a little over her words. “Y-You see, there’s a corrupted Divine Beast on a rampage in the world I govern—I-I mean, the world my *friend* governs.”

“A Divine Beast?” asked Tanya standing tall and imposing with her scythe in her hand. “In that case, shouldn’t it be the responsibility of that world’s goddess to exterminate it or have it sent to Dogorogma?” She sounded unimpressed.

“You’re correct, of course,” said Telbyress, clearing her throat. “But this beast has *immense* magic power, and *tremendous* physical strength as well. And I’m not very good at extermination work... I mean, my *friend* isn’t! She’s completely at her wit’s end! At this rate, the entire world is going to be destroyed! But your magic is strong enough to smite Beasts of Calamity like it’s nothing. I was wondering if perhaps I could ask you to come deal with it for me?”

Flio gave Telbyress a sidelong glance. “It sounds like your friend is in a lot of trouble,” he responded. “I don’t mind lending a hand. I can head out right away if you’re ready.” He looked between Hiya and Tanya. “What do you two think?”

Hiya looked concerned. “In the literature I have read, Divine Beasts are a level even above Beasts of Disaster. Even one such as I has never had an occasion to encounter such a being in reality...”

Tanya nodded. “Nonetheless, I expect that Master Flio would have no trouble defeating it. And perhaps we could use the Divine Beast as materials for synthesizing more medicine...”

Flio considered his companions’ words and decided to give the matter some thought.

◇That Night—Flio's Living Room◇

"And so," Flio declared after dinner, when everyone had gathered to hear him pass on Telbyress's request, "I'm thinking of paying a visit to this other world to do something about the rampaging Divine Beast." He had told Telbyress to wait one day for him to consult with the rest of the household before giving her his response. "Tanya's the one who's fought a Divine Beast before, and she says I should be able to handle it without too much trouble. But I'd appreciate it if some of you could come along to support me. It'll be my first—"

"My lord husband!" Rys interrupted him midsentence, shooting to her feet and raising her right hand high. "Your beloved Rys will accompany you as always!"

Flio hadn't expected his wife to say any differently, of course, but a worried look passed over his face nonetheless. "I'm very happy you feel that way, Rys... Personally, I would like to keep you away from danger no matter what, especially so soon after Rynàsze was born..."

"Preposterous!" Rys shouted, leaning her body forward towards Flio. "I swore that I would accompany you for the rest of my life, to the end of Klyrode and beyond! And I'll be certain to look after Rynàsze as well!"

"I know," said Flio, placing a hand on Rys's shoulder. "Well...I suppose I should have it wrapped up within a day, anyway. Just promise me you won't do anything reckless."

"Thank you, my lord husband!" Rys said, grinning and clapping her hands together. "I promise you won't regret taking me along!"

"I want to go too, but we have school that day..." said Garyl.

"That's right," said Elinàsze. "As much as I'd love to accompany papa, we can't skip school. And I suppose there's no sense in waiting for us to have a day off..." The twins shared a look and sighed in disappointment.

"Hrm!" said Ghozal, loudly clearing his throat. "There's no chance I'm getting left out of something as exciting as this!" He folded his arms and laughed a bold, "Ha ha ha!" but with Ghorosnoozing atop his head clinging to his horn, he looked more warm and snug than imposing and fierce.

Tanya, who had just finished serving everyone a cup of tea, raised her hand next. “Pardon me, but your humble servant Tanya would request to accompany you, to assist with everyone’s needs and serve as an advance guard.”

“Me too, me too!” said Wyne, springing up beside Tanya and raising both arms as she jumped in the air. “I’m going too!”

“I suppose I should show you whippersnappers what this old man can do as well!” Sleip, the former Infernal, laughed. Rislei, however, grabbed his arm in protest.

“Don’t, papa!” she said. “Weren’t you *just* complaining about how much your back hurts?”

“What’s that, Rislei?” said Sleip. “Oh, it’s nothing to worry about! It was just that one day when Byleri and I were—”

“L-Lord Sleip!” Byleri clasped both hands over her lover’s mouth, her entire face suddenly bright red. “L-Like, not another word!”

“H-Hmph...” Rislei blushed as well when she realized what was going on, turning her face away in a pout. “You two really *are* all over each other...”



“Hm!” Calsi’im said, posing with his bony arms as if he had muscles to flex. “You’ve been taking good care of Tia and Rabbitz, Lord Flio! I’d love to have a chance to pay back the favor if I can!” His daughter Rabbitz was clinging to the top of his head as she slept. Between those two and Ghozal and Ghoros, it was quite an adorable scene.

“An unknown Divine Beast living in another world?” Hiya inclined, raising their hand. “This will be an excellent opportunity to further my studies. I too would like to accompany you, if I may.”

“If Their Divinity Hiya’s going, I’m coming along too, of course,” said Damalynas, raising hers as well.

Things proceeded in that vein.

“If Sir Ghozal is going,” said Balirossa, “then so shall I!”

“I guess I gotta come along to keep mew compurrny, then,” said Uliminas. “O-Only ‘cause I *gotta*, though!”

“I’ve built up a lotta muscle workin’ on the farm!” said Blossom. “Maybe I can put it to use!”

“I can cast defensive spells...” said Belano.

“*Snuffle! Snuffle!*” said Sybe.

And so, almost everyone save for Folmina and Rylnàsze, who were fast asleep in their rooms, volunteered to come along. Flio looked over the assembled party with his usual easygoing expression.

“Thank you, everyone,” he said. “But it sounds like there’s a limit to the number of people we can take to the other world. We need to limit it to six people, including myself and Rys. So how about this...” Flio waved his hand and a number of cords appeared in his grasp, equal to the number of people who wanted to come along. “We’ll decide by lottery. The winning cords have a red mark on their end. Oh, and I hope it should go without saying, but if you use magic to tell which cords are winners, you’ll be disqualified.”

“H-Hrm...” muttered Ghozal, a bit too quickly. “Y-Yes, of course. Hrm.”

The room was full of the sound of involuntary snickering at Ghozal’s behavior.

The lottery was held fair and square, and Ghozal, Tanya, Hiya, and Damalynas were selected to join the expedition. Along with Flio and Rys, they numbered six in total.

“I’ll contact Telbyress tomorrow morning, and we’ll head off immediately,” said Flio. “We’ll be going right home once we’re done. I’d expect to be back by the evening. Kids, do your best at school. Uliminas and Balirossa, I’ll leave the store in your hands. And Byleri, could I ask you to take care of the housework?”

“All right!” cheered Ghozal. “Let’s show them what a Dark One can do!”

“Your servant Tanya shall arrange things perfectly, Master Flio. You will be in safe hands.”

“Exalted One, I am honored to be of assistance,” said Hiya.

“It’s been forever since I’ve let myself loose like this...” mused Damalynas.

Flio just kept smiling as always, pulling Rys into a gentle embrace.

“My lord husband...” Rys said, gazing into his eyes. “I will do my best as well.”

“Thank you, Rys,” said Flio. “Just please be careful not to get yourself hurt.”

◇The Following Morning—Flio’s Workshop◇

After seeing the children off to school, the six who were participating in the expedition to slay the Divine Beast assembled in front of Flio’s workshop. After a short wait, Telbyress appeared in front of them, holding a long magic rod, apparently having used Teleportation, because she appeared instantaneously without any warning.

Flio stepped forward and greeted Telbyress with his usual easygoing smile. “Good morning, Miss Telbyress,” he said. “We’ve decided to help you with the problem you mentioned yesterday.”

“Th-Thank you!” the goddess said, bowing over and over again, a relieved smile on her face. “Really, thank you so very much!”

“Although,” Flio asked, “before we set out, we were wondering if you might tell us what you know about this Divine Beast we’ll be fighting?”

A troubled expression crossed Telbyress’s face. “Well, the thing is...I’m afraid I

don't know much at all..."

"You don't?" Flio blinked in surprise.

"W-Well, you know! It's a Divine Beast...and it's not only terribly strong at magic, but it's rather fast as well. I haven't been able to get a very good look. I mean!" she hastily corrected herself. "My *friend* hasn't! She's really been at her wits' end..."

"Hrm..." said Ghozal, crossing his arms. "Well, if you don't know, you don't know. I suppose the thing to do would be to head there and see what we can find out ourselves." He turned to Flio and nodded.

Back when he had reigned as Dark One, Ghozal made full use of the elite spy corps he had at his disposal, learning everything he could about an enemy before he acted in order to make the best judgments he could. He was never the type to propose rushing in to attack the enemy head-on.

"True enough." Flio nodded in agreement. "That seems like the best we can do in this situation." The rest of the party bobbed their heads as well.

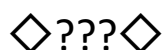
Telbyress breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that nobody was going to berate her for her lack of information. "A-All right, then! I'll open a portal leading there at once!" She held her magic rod aloft, and began a magic incantation. A magic circle appeared at her feet, and from it emerged a magic gate. "I'm sorry for the delay! On the other side of this portal is the world being attacked by the Divine Beast."

She cast the gate open, revealing a scene of desolation. The skies of the other world were full of ominous red clouds, and plumes of smoke were rising from the nearby forest.

"Looks like we need to hurry," Flio said, taking the first step through the gate. Rys followed after him, then Ghozal, then Hiya, then Damalynas, and finally Tanya.

Telbyress saw them off from the Klyrode side of the portal. "Lord Flio..." she said, clasping her hands together in prayer. "Everyone, please...save the world of Ryleina. I will stay here to conjure a portal when you're ready to return to Klyrode. I can't go with you, but I will be watching with my Mirror of Scrying. If

anything happens, I'll create an exit for you at once."



"My third other world, after Klyrode and Dogorogma..." Flio mused, calling up the information window for his own Teleportation spell. The window displayed a list of various places Flio visited frequently in the world of Klyrode. *It looks like the search conditions are set to "location,"* he observed. *Let's see what happens if I change it to "world."*

He made the change mentally, and the number of items displayed shrank dramatically. There were now only three: "Klyrode," "Dogorogma," and "Ryleina."

Klyrode's the world we came from, Flio thought. *And Dogorogma's that world underneath the Celestial Plane. Meaning that this must be Ryleina...* He focused his mind on the word "Ryleina" in the window. He had a great number of locations registered in Klyrode and Dogorogma, but the list of destinations for this new world was so far completely blank.

"Of course," Flio said, nodding to himself. "Teleportation takes me to any place I've visited before, but this is my first time setting foot in this world. I haven't been anywhere yet, obviously." He held out his arm, summoning a magic circle. *I'm not sure if this will work, but it's worth a try...*

A door appeared from the magic circle Flio had summoned. He went to open it...

◇The World of Klyrode—Flio's Workshop◇

Telbyress couldn't believe her eyes. No sooner had the portal she summoned to send Flio's party to the world of Ryleina vanished, than another one appeared in its stead, right before her eyes.

"Th-This isn't a local Teleportation spell..." she muttered. "This is a portal from another world..."

D-Don't tell me... The Celestial Plane's bureaucracy finally figured out that I let a Divine Beast nearly destroy the entire world I was assigned to govern! They must be coming to arrest me! N-No! This isn't my fault! How was I supposed to know a berserk Divine Beast was going to slip in while I was vacationing with my

boyfriend?! And now everything's ruined... Beads of sweat ran down her face, her teeth chattering with fear. *And there's no way I could have asked the Guardians to bring things under control! I mean, if they found out, they'd take away my position! That's why I had to ask that human they allowed in Dogorogma for help. But how could they have found me out so quickly...?* On the whole, they were not particularly goddess-like thoughts.

The door swung open.

"Eeeeeek!" Telbyress shrieked, throwing herself to the ground. "I-I'm so sorry!"

But the person who stepped out of the door was none other than Flio.

"I-I have an excuse!" Telbyress continued, until it struck her who had come out of the door. "I mean—wait—*what?!*" she exclaimed, unable to comprehend what she was seeing.

"Oh, excuse me," said Flio, bowing his head politely to the goddess writhing pitifully on the floor. "I was just testing something." He looked over the area. "Okay, looks like there's no problem going from that world to Klyrode. We should be able to get home without you needing to trouble yourself with it."

Satisfied, Flio stepped back through the portal and closed the door.

Flio was from the world of Palma, summoned to Klyrode as one of the candidates for the role of Hero by the Magical Kingdom. When he arrived, he received a blessing from the gods that raised his stats so high that the system couldn't properly display them and only listed them as ∞ . Not only that, but he received the highest possible mastery level of every skill and spell that existed in Klyrode. His Teleportation spell was, likewise, much stronger than the run-of-the-mill version.

Ordinarily, Teleportation could only take the caster to a location in the same world they were in, but the version of the spell Flio had let him visit other worlds as well, as long as he had been there before. Unfortunately, it only seemed like it worked for locations he had visited *after* he learned the spell. His homeworld was still inaccessible to him.

Flio, for his part, seemed to have no idea just how outrageous his powers

were.

Telbyress after Flio as he departed, her body trembling. “H-Hang on...” she muttered. “Wh-What was that? Did the *human* create that portal? I-I’ve never heard of a mortal doing anything like that!”

She crawled over to the spot where the portal had been and began prodding at the ground, a vacant smile plastered on her face. “Th-There must be a trick! This spot has to be hiding some kind of mechanism!”

She poked and prodded all around, but it was to no avail.



“What do you suppose that woman’s doing, prodding at the ground like that?” Blossom, who was carrying a load of vegetables in from the farm, asked as she glanced over at Telbyress.

“Hmm...” said Wyne, who had been helping Blossom out. “Dunno, dunno!”

The two stopped and watched for a moment, but the goddess showed no signs of giving up on her investigation of the ground in front of Flio’s workshop.

◇The World of Ryleina◇

“What are you up to, Mister Flio?” Ghozal asked as he went about surveying their surroundings.

“Oh,” Flio said. “I was just checking to see if I could open a portal back to Klyrode, to make sure we had a way back home.”

“Hrm...” Ghozal replied. “So, were you able to do it? Directly from another world?”

“Yes, the test went well.” Flio gave one of his typical smiles.

“Incredible...” Ghozal couldn’t help but smirk to himself. “I guess to our Mister Flio, even teleporting to another world is as easy as pie.”

“Now now, my magic really isn’t *that* special...” objected Flio.

“My lord husband!” Rys said, running up to the two of them, looking clearly on edge. “I apologize for interrupting your conversation, but...” She turned to

face the forest, standing in front of Flio to shield him from danger. She was partway transformed into her full lupine form already, her claws and tail out, in a low stance with her hands touching the ground, ready to spring into action at any moment.

“It’s coming,” said Hiya, stepping up to Rys’s right side.

“Looks like it!” Damalynas agreed, materializing from thin air to Rys’s left.

Ghozal folded his arms and peered out into the forest. “Hrm. I can’t say I like going into this blind, but I suppose there’s nothing we can do about that now.”

An enormous creature burst out of the forest, toppling the trees in its way. It somewhat resembled a female duck, save for its immense height—at least five meters tall. But to everyone’s surprise, the thing was clearly in distress.

“Waaaaaaaah!” sobbed a pitiable, feminine voice.

“Huh?” Everyone in Flio’s party was taken aback.

“H-Help me!” she wailed, diving behind Flio and curling her oversized body into the smallest ball she could, shaking violently.

Flio pulled up a window to check the creature’s status.

Divine Beast Denjarna Duck

Ghozal and the rest, who had been peeking at the window over Flio’s shoulders, balked in surprise. “*That’s* the Divine Beast?!”

Flio turned around to address the enormous cowering duck. “Excuse me... Are you really a Divine Beast?”

The creature nodded her trembling head. “Y-Yes,” she started. “I am the Divine Beast Denjarna Duck...”

“Well, what’s this about?” Ghozal asked, tilting his head in puzzlement as he peered at the duck over his crossed arms. “For a being that was supposedly running rampant over this world, you seem pretty spineless.”

“Gimme a break!” Denjarna Duck protested, suddenly snapping to her feet. “Running rampant? *Me*?! There’s a bunch of real scary humans trying to

capture me and the other Divine Beasts! They're using all sorts of weird spells and strange weapons! It's *their* fault the world is in this state!" she shouted through her tears.

Flio and the rest of his party cocked their heads in thought.

"That's strange..." Flio muttered. "That's quite a different story from what that goddess told us..."

Krack-a-thow! Suddenly, a bolt of fearsome lightning streaked down from overhead—a spell!

"Eeeeeeeek!" Denjarna Duck shrieked, shielding her head with her wings. "They're back *again*?!"

Looking closely, Flio could see singe marks here and there on the duck's feathers. *It looks like she took a lot of those attacks on her way here...* he thought, feeling a pang of sympathy for the Divine Beast.

"Hrm," said Ghozal, looking up at the sky. "That *was* a pretty powerful spell. If they keep flinging lightning bolts around like that, it won't be long until this whole forest goes up in flames."

"Ghozal!" Rys scolded him, smacking her fists against his pectoral muscles. "Don't just stand there analyzing the situation! Do something, before my lord husband is struck by lightning!"

"Mistress," said Tanya, readying her scythe. "Leave it to me. I, Tanya, shall—"

"Now now," Flio interrupted. "No need to panic." His usual easygoing smile plastered on his face, he raised his hand. The lightning spell splintered and dispersed into the sky with a sharp *ping!*

"M-My lord husband!" gasped a wide-eyed Rys. "That was incredible!"

"What, don't you trust your husband?" laughed Ghozal. "Mister Flio eats spells like that for breakfast!"

"Hang on'tch!" A woman dressed in a black cloak said, emerging from the forest. "Nobody told me there was someone who could nullify a Divine-tier Lightning Bolt Spell hanging around here'tch!"

At the sight of this woman, Denjarna Duck, who had sprung to her feet

earlier, curled her enormous body into an even smaller ball than before.

“Eeeeeeeek!” she cried, pointing one of her wings at the cloaked woman. “Th- That’s her! She’s the one messing up the forest with all those weird spells!”

The woman sneered maliciously at the Divine Beast’s words. “I believe you’ll find it’s your own fault for not coming quietly’tch,” she said. “I told you I’d sell you to a good family, didn’t I’tch?” She cast off her cloak, revealing a large magic collar clutched in her left hand—likely some kind of item she had brought to subdue Denjarna Duck. “Now, submit to me—Lestrittch the Great’tch! You outsiders can just get out my way’tch.” She made a shooping gesture towards Flio’s party.

“Master Flio,” said Tanya, stepping forward. “Please allow your humble servant Tanya to handle this.”

“Oh?” Lestrittch said, mocking. “And what’s this? Some maid thinks she can stand in the way of the Lestrittch the Great’tch? I can tell you aren’t human, but whatever power you have won’t be nearly—*nearly* enough to face the likes of —” But that was as far as she got. Tanya closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye with a short-range Teleportation spell and snatched the collar out of Lestrittch’s hand, snapping it on the magician’s neck instead.

“It’s no great trouble, actually,” Tanya said. “One must merely use the tools on hand.”

“D-Don’t be a fool’tch!” Lestrittch snapped. “That collar can only be used by its set owner—me’tch!”

“I see...” said Flio. “So all I have to do is overwrite the owner setting?”

Lestrittch guffawed. “As *if* you could—” she began, when a text window appeared in the air in front of the collar.

Owner changed from Lestrittch to Tanyalite.

“Wh-Whaaaaa?!” Lestrittch’s eyes shot open in fear when she read the text. She tried to run, but before she could move, the collar constricted tightly around her neck. “N-No way...” she muttered before falling unconscious, collapsing on the spot and foaming at the mouth.

Tanya looked down at the woman at her feet and sighed. “All bark and no

bite, I see,” she said, tying her up with a magic rope. “This was a fitting end for scum like you.”

Lestrittch was unconscious and gave no response.



“So,” said Flio, “you were on your way to be a celestial’s pet when you fell to this world mid-transit?”

“Yes, yes, that’s right!” Denjarna Duck nodded her enormous head, gesticulating with her wings as she frantically explained the situation between large bites of Rys’s vegetable stir-fry. “And then we were attacked by that bunch of weirdos! I was just doing my best to try and get away!” In no time at all she had devoured the entire large plate of vegetables Rys had prepared for her.

“I made food because the creature seemed hungry...” Rys muttered in awe over the large frying pan she had set up in the outdoor kitchen Flio brought along in his Bottomless Bag. “But how much can she possibly eat...?”

Tanya, who had been cutting piles of vegetables to stir-fry with extraordinary speed, furrowed her brow. “An excellent question...” she muttered. “Feeding the Divine Beast may well take a toll on our food supplies...”

“Well,” said Ghozal, glancing over at the giant duck, “if it gets desperate, we can always eat that thing! Ha ha ha ha ha!” he laughed loudly at his own joke.

“Huh? Whah?” Denjarna Duck stopped eating and turned visibly pale, once again beginning to tremble. “P-Please, don’t eat me!” she whined, shoving her plate of vegetables into Ghozal’s arms and groveling on the ground. “Anything but that!”

The party burst into laughter. “Don’t worry,” said Flio, stepping up to the Magic Beast and softly petting her back. “I can make a portal back to our world at any time. We can always go back and get more ingredients. You can go ahead and eat your fill.”

“Y-You mean it?!” the duck exclaimed in joy, shooting up to her feet and snatching her plate back from Ghozal. “Don’t bully me like that, you scary-faced old man! Now give that back!” She thrust her beak into the pile of food and

began greedily gobbling. Rys and Tanya smirked knowingly and got back to cooking.

“But it’s strange...” Flio said, staring intently at Denjarna Duck and tilting his head in thought.

“Exalted One,” began Hiya. “What is strange, may I ask?”

“Oh,” said Flio, turning to face Hiya and crossing his arms. “It’s just, didn’t Miss Telbyress tell us that this world was on the brink of destruction thanks to a rampaging Divine Beast? But it sounds like the ones destroying actually the world are humans *chasing* Divine Beasts...”

“Indeed...” said Hiya, lowering their head in thought. “Perhaps we should ask the Goddess Telbyress for more information. Although, she was very specific about it being a Divine Beast destroying the world. I can only imagine that that truly is what she believes to be the case.”

“Which means,” Flio said, mulling the situation over, “we need to rethink our approach...”

◇Meanwhile, with Telbyress...◇

After seeing Flio’s party off, Telbyress stumbled her way to the goblins’ cottage on the corner of Blossom’s Farm. Before she knew it she was stuffing her face with homemade sweets, complaining about her job to anyone who would listen. “Can you believe that?” she griped. “Isn’t that just the worst?”

Hokh’hokton, who had heard the story several times already, stared at the goddess with an expression of supreme tedium.

Telbyress was supposed to be using her magic to keep an eye on Flio and company, but she quickly got bored and wandered off, telling herself, *There’s no harm in looking around a little. After all, I came all this way!* Now she was sitting in a chair in the cottage, drinking a cup of tea Hokh’hokton made for her.

“And we don’t get *any* time off!” she continued. “I mean, do they expect us to spend every day of our lives watching over the world, with no rest at all? And I want to get married one of these days, you know! How am I supposed to do that if I spend all my marriageable centuries working this stupid job?! You get what I’m saying, right? Don’t you?”

“Hahhh...” Hokh’hokton sighed, forcing a smile. “W-Well, I suppose...”

I-I was so excited when this pretty lady showed up at my house! the goblin lamented to himself. I thought it might finally be my chance, so I brought her inside, but all she’s done is eat my food and drink my tea! She’s even started raiding the pantries herself! And worse, she hasn’t listened to a word I’ve said! All she does is complain about her job. What a tiresome lady...

“Hey!” said Telbyress, snapping Hokh’hokton out of his thoughts. “I’m still talking, you know! Are you listening or not?”

“A-Ah! Y-Yes, I am listening! Indeed!”

“Well, all right then,” the goddess nodded. “So like I was saying, this one time I was...”

H-How long is she going to complain?! Hokh’hokton stared, utterly speechless, as Telbyress kept on talking and talking, showing no sign that the complaints would abate any time soon. Th-This might be the end for old Hokh’hokton...

◇Some Time Later—The World of Ryleina◇

“I see...” said Zofina, frowning as Flio finished explaining the situation. “So that’s why you called me...”

Flio and the angel Zofina kept a pair of Communication Gems on hand so that they could communicate with each other anytime they needed to discuss Flio’s panacea. The gems were originally set on a pair of rings, but at Rys’s insistence, Flio had transferred his own gem to a necklace instead.

Telbyress’s story had been far from the actual situation, and Flio thought that speaking to her fellow celestial, Zofina, might shed some light on what was going on. Zofina had wasted no time in getting to the world of Ryleina. She was wearing her angelic form openly here—half skeleton and half maiden, with an ancient cloak draped over her shoulders.

“I can’t believe it came to this...” Zofina sighed, crossing her arms in thought. She looked over at Flio’s party. All six of them, as well as Denjarna Duck, were staring at her rather intently. “Mister Flio...” she started. “Might I perhaps have a moment to speak with you alone?”

“Sure,” said Flio. “I don’t mind. What’s up?”

Zofina took Flio aside to a corner of the nearby forest. When they were alone, she faced him and bowed deep, keeping her head lowered apologetically.

“Mister Flio... I am truly sorry. I’m afraid that all this trouble is the fault of some very stupid celestials.”

“Hm?” Flio asked, cocking his head. “‘Stupid celestials’?”



“It really is quite peculiar, though...” said Rys, resting her chin on her hand as she waited for her husband to come back from the forest.

“I agree,” Hiya nodded. “The story of celestials transporting Divine Beasts to raise as pets is especially strange. Divine Beasts serve important functions in the worlds they inhabit. I wouldn’t imagine them to be the type you’d move between worlds on a whim, to say nothing of the difficulty of keeping one as a pet...”

Flio’s party puzzled over the mystery until Damalynas, who had been keeping watch over Lestrittch, suddenly spoke up. “Oh? Looks like someone’s finally awake.” Lestrittch, bound tight and laying on the ground at Damalynas’s feet, groaned and squirmed in discomfort.

The party gathered around Lestrittch, but before they could do anything, Ghozal raised his head. “Hrm?” he grunted, turning to look in the opposite direction that Flio and Zofina had gone. “What was that voice?”

◇Meanwhile—In the Forest◇

“Y-You fiend! How dare you treat me like this?! Do you not know who I am? I am the White King of Divine Beasts, Leonorna!” A Divine Beast resembling an enormous lion—Leonorna—raised his voice ferociously, but with all four of his limbs bound and his body caught in a giant net, his fearsome roars were nothing more than impotent howling.

The giant hefting the lion on his back looked back over his shoulder at his captured prey. “Yer awfully feisty for a captured beast’b,” he said. “I suppose if yer in such high spirits, you can take a bit of rough handling’b! Good news for me—means I don’t gotta worry ’bout being careful with you’b! A catch like you

will fetch a high price plus or minus a leg or two, after all'b! Bwa'b ha ha ha ha!"

"Wh-What did you say?!" demanded Leonorna. "I thought I was coming here to be fawned over by all the beauties of the Celestial Plane! I was going to have glamorous goddesses cooing and sighing all over me! I won't let you sell me to some bastards who don't care whether or not I have all my legs!" He struggled for all he was worth, but with his legs bound so tight, he could hardly move at all.

The giant laughed again. "Bwa'b ha ha ha ha! If yer lucky, maybe you'll get fawned over by a beautiful slave merchant instead'b! She'll take good care of you until you're sold as merchandise'b."

Leonorna's already white fur went pale. "P-Preposterous! You intend to sell the proud Divine Beast Leonorna to a *slave merchant*?!" He tried again to struggle, but to no further avail than before.

"Bwa'b ha ha ha ha! No luck, kitty'b! Gigantarobb's ropes can't be broken that easily'b. Now, settle down before I give you a knock or three'b." Leering, the giant Gigantarobb raised his hefty fist to demonstrate.

Suddenly, a voice cried out, "Hey, blockhead!"

"Bwa?" Gigantarobb turned to see Ghozal standing in front of him, his arms folded. He was still in his human form, and Gigantarobb was more than five times his size, but he stood blocking the giant's path with utmost confidence. "Who're you, pip-squeak'b? You got business with me'b?" Gigantarobb growled, stooping over to sneer in Ghozal's face.

Ghozal glared back, undaunted. "I heard something fishy happening in the forest and came to check it out, and what do I find...? A blockhead!" he shouted. "Are you going to hand over the Divine Beast quietly or am I gonna have to take it by force? We're not letting bastards like you and Lestrritch have your way with them." He held out his hand as if he expected Gigantarobb to hand the lion over on the spot.

"What's that'b? You know Lestrritch'b?"

"Yeah," answered Ghozal. "Our maid took her down."

"Don't you insult her'b!" Gigantarobb shouted, his face twisting up in anger.

“Lestrittch is our second-in-command’b! She’d never lose to a mere *maid’b!*” The giant raised his leg high in the air and brought it down, aiming to stomp on Ghozal’s head. “Death to liars’b!”

“Hah!” Ghozal shouted, transforming instantly back to his natural demonic form and catching the giant’s leg tight in his arms. He was much larger in this form—although still only half as tall as Gigantarobb. The height difference, however, didn’t seem to matter in the slightest. Ghozal quickly halted the full weight of Gigantarobb’s devastating stomp.

“Bwaaah?!” The giant’s eyes went wide with sheer disbelief. He tried with all his might to pull his leg away from Ghozal, but found himself unable to move it even an inch. Ghozal held on tight, not letting the giant pull away.

“See?” Ghozal said. “You shoulda just listened!” And then, with a mighty “Hah!” he lifted the giant up by his leg and slammed him down hard on the forest floor, headfirst.

“Bwaaaaaaa?!” Gigandarobb came crashing down with such force that not only his head, but his entire upper body was planted in the ground. “H-How dare you’b?! You’ll pay for that’b!” he cried, pulling himself out of the dirt.

“Good!” said Ghozal. “I was starting to worry this wouldn’t be any fun!” He aimed a flying kick for the giant’s face, impacting his jaw with full power.

“Baaaaaaaaaaaaa?!” the giant screamed as his neck twisted back at a truly nasty-looking angle.

“There’s more where that came from!” said Ghozal, cracking his knuckles and stretching his neck. “It’s been a while since I got to let loose like this!” Eager for a fight, he was just getting started.

Gigantarobb, unfortunately, was lying motionless on the ground with his neck twisted at an unnatural angle.

“Oh, come on!” Ghozal said, pouting with disappointment. “Can’t even take one friendly kick. And here I thought I was gonna let loose for the first time in forever...”

Leonorna, who had tumbled out of Gigantarobb’s net during the fighting, shook with fear as he looked up at Ghozal. “Holy hell, this guy is just too

much..." he muttered. "This might be the end for the White King of Divine Beasts... If only I could have gotten fawned over by a beautiful woman before I died..."

◇Some Time Later◇

The party looked in disbelief as Flio finished his story. Rys was the first to speak up. "So that's what this is about?" she asked, as dumbfounded as the rest. "Denjarna Duck and the other Divine Beast Ghozal rescued were being transported through some black market operation?"

Zofina nodded bitterly.

According to what Zofina had told Flio, Divine Beasts played an indispensable role in the worlds they came from. Accordingly, it was illegal to move them between worlds. Recently, however, there had been more and more incidents of Divine Beasts running rampant. The Divine Beasts that did this were considered damaged goods and sent to Dogorogma, until a certain goddess had the bright idea of keeping a faulty Divine Beast as a pet.

"If we're just going to dispose of it, I might as well take it for myself!" she'd said. *"Imagine, a Divine Beast for a pet! I would love to own something so rare! And don't worry, I'll take care to ensure they don't go on any rampages."*

But as the one goddess boasted of her exotic pet, more and more goddesses found themselves seized by the desire for Divine Beasts of their own.

"I should like a Divine Beast for a pet myself..."

"Me too..."

"I would hate to lose out to the likes of her!"

And soon, bowing to pressure from the goddesses' demands, the Otherworld Management Bureau of the Celestial Plane issued a proclamation: moving Divine Beasts between worlds was to be lawful in cases where the Divine Beast had become faulty, and in cases where, due to the birth of a new Divine Beast or other such situations, there were two Divine Beasts in a world that filled the same role.

The responsibility for making sure that all of the rules were being properly

observed, as well as the procurement of the Divine Beasts themselves, was given to the Otherworld Management Bureau. Goddesses who wanted a Divine Beast as a pet were meant to register their name with the bureau and wait their turn.

However, as you might expect, many of the goddesses threw terrible tantrums, unwilling to wait for the Otherworld Management Bureau to go through all of the lengthy procedures necessary to ensure no harm was being done. Some of them turned to the interworld black market, which would gladly supply a Divine Beast to anyone with the money to pay, proper procedures be damned.

“So...” Ghozal began, crossing his arms and looking down at the rope-bound Lestrirtch and Gigantarobb. “Some black market group is illegally collecting Divine Beasts and taking them to worlds with particularly inattentive goddesses, huh? Seems like we’ve stepped into a hell of a situation...”

Incidentally, the rope binding the two was made by Flio, and enchanted to nullify magic and reduce the captive’s physical strength, among many other features. Lestrirtch had been awake for a while, but despite her struggles, she had been totally unable to free herself.

“Hey, you,” said Ghozal, hefting Lestrirtch up by the ropes. “You were abducting Magic Beasts from other worlds to bring to the Celestial Plane?”

“N-No’tch!” Lestrirtch protested. “We weren’t the ones abducting Magic Beasts’tch! We were just trying to steal them’tch!”

“Steal them?” Ghozal furrowed his brow.

“That’s right’tch!” Lestrirtch went on, kicking in her restraints. “The Goddess of Ryleina is famous for hardly doing her job at all’tch. That group’s been using this world to traffic Divine Beasts to the Celestial Plane without getting caught’tch. We figured we might as well take the Divine Beasts for ourselves’tch. But we failed’tch! We never managed to bring any Divine Beasts to the Celestial Plane at all’tch! We’re pure’tch—well, maybe we just have one little blemish’tch. But it’s our first offense’tch! We promise we won’t do it again, so would you please let us go’tch?”

Ghozal slapped her across the face.

“Owww’tch!” she cried. “Stop it’ch!”

Ghozal smacked her again, shutting her up. “You...” he growled, glaring daggers. “Do you have *any* idea what you’re saying?! I’ll listen to your explanation, but if you piss me off again, I won’t hold back.”

“N-No’tch!” Lestrirtch protested. “Please don’t’tch!”

“Well?” Ghozal said. “I said I’d listen to your explanation, so talk!”

“Y-You say that, but you clearly want to smack me around no matter what I say’tch...”

“Don’t be absurd!” grumbled Ghozal, raising his palm again. “I want the truth! Tell me that, and I won’t have to break your jaw!”

“E-Eeeek’tch!” Lestrirtch shrieked in fear. “S-Stop! Violence is wrong’tch!”



Out in the forest, a very distressed-looking Zofina was reaching out telepathically to one of her colleagues.

“Zofina?” said the voice in her head. “*What’s up?*”

“Hello, is that Malun? I’m sorry to impose, but can I ask you for a small favor? I’d like you to summon the goddess Telbyress as soon as possible, and tell her to come to my location in the world Ryleina.”

“*You seem pretty worked up...*” said Malun. “*Did something happen?*”

“You better believe something happened! I have been given strong reason to believe that the Divine Beast smuggling operation that’s been causing so many problems lately uses the world Ryleina, which the goddess Telbyress governs, as one of their smuggling routes!”

“*Are you serious? How would that even happen?! If this goddess is actually managing her world, she’d know about something like that right away, wouldn’t she?*”

“Well...” Zofina sighed. “It seems she has been leaving Ryleina unattended for long stretches of time. Things have gotten bad enough that the world might collapse at any moment.”

"I... I see. I'll go find the goddess Telbyress as soon as I can."

"Thank you. I owe you one. By the way, I should mention that she is currently staying in the planetoid world known as Klyrode. I'll send you the precise location via telepathy."

"Got it, thanks. I'll take care of this as quickly as I can."

And with that, Malun ended the psychic conversation. Zofina looked up at the sky. The ominous red cloud above had grown deeper in hue. *Hurry, Malun...* she thought, clenching her fists. *There's not a second to lose...*

◇Meanwhile—The World of Klyrode, Hokh'hokton's Room◇

"Oh, my!" said Telbyress, a great big smile on her face. "You made me lunch? Oh, you shouldn't have!"

What is this lady saying?! Hokh'hokton thought to himself, a perfectly blank expression plastered to his face. She was just grumbling about how hungry she was, how much she wanted to eat this or that, how she'd die if she didn't eat lunch...

As the goblin watched, Telbyress took a big bite of the food he had prepared. "Hmmm..." she mused. "It's not inedible or anything, but I wish you'd put in just a liiiittle bit more effort here. I mean, I'll *eat* it, don't get me wrong!"

And in the end, even that was no good... Hokh'hokton's face went pale as he gritted his teeth, desperately suppressing the anger welling up inside of him. Telbyress went on eating right next to him, apparently oblivious to the goblin's mental state. Little did she know, there might as well have been a warrant out for her arrest.

◇The World of Ryleina◇

Damalynas was patrolling the area around the campsite as the others ate lunch, when suddenly something in a corner of the forest got her attention. She stopped. "Hm?" There, a deep groove dug into dirt leading a long distance away. All around it were felled trees. "Looks like something might've been dragged away by force," she pondered aloud.

She followed the groove as far as it went. At the very end, she stumbled upon

an enormous bag. “Now then, what have we here...?” Stuffed inside the bag was an enormous two-headed serpent, clearly unconscious. “Well! I do believe I may have stumbled upon a Divine Beast! I suppose I should bring this thing back to camp.”

Damalynas waved a single finger, and the bag floated up into the air. As she walked back to camp, the bag followed behind, flying along.

◇The World of Ryleina—Campsite◇

“Hey there, miss! You’re a pretty good-looking lady, I must say...” Leonorna said, smiling oafishly at Rys as she prepared food for the party. “The name’s Leonorna. I’m a cute and playful Divine Beast. But I’m still all heartbroken about being *tricked* and *abducted* to another world!” he sobbed. “Might I bury my muzzle in that splendid chest of yours to try and ease my pain?” He didn’t waste time waiting for her permission before he sauntered straight up to the lady herself and went to press his leonine head against Rys’s breasts.

But before he could go much further, he found the sharp blade of a scythe hooked dangerously around his neck. “Brute of a Divine Beast,” said Tanya. “You will *not* disrespect my mistress.”

Leonorna lifted his front paws in a gesture of surrender and turned to face Tanya. He looked directly at Tanya’s chest, then back at Rys’s, then once more at Tanya’s. “*Haah...*” he sighed, slumping his shoulders. “I appreciate the offer, Miss Maid, but I’m afraid a modest chest like yours’ll never be enough to cure my heartbreak.”

Tanya twitched in irritation at the lion’s smug grin. She took a deep breath, and with a mighty, “*Fwooooooosh!*” she exhaled a gout of intense flames.

“Huh?!” Leonorna reeled from the utterly unexpected attack, unable to avoid the sudden flames. “Ah! Hot! Hot!” he cried as the tip of his tail caught fire. “Ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch! Y-You tiny-breasted woman! How dare you treat the Divine Beast Leonorna this way! Ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch! Cut it ouuuuut!”

“If you are a Divine Beast, then show some dignity!” Tanya shouted, not letting up on the fire even as she did. “All I see is a mewling wretch of an animal! I’ll roast you and serve you as a side dish for lunch!”

Leonorna fled as fast as his legs could take him, crying and wailing.

Flio walked up beside Rys as she watched Tanya chase the lion through the camp, a sly smirk on her face. “Leonorna is a handful, isn’t he?”

“I suppose that lion will have to owe Tanya a generous thank-you later,” Rys replied.

“Hm?”

“After all,” continued Rys, holding up the knife she had been using to cook and smiling brightly. “If Leonorna had come just one millimeter closer, I would have made him into mincemeat.”

“Ha ha ha...” Flio laughed, a little grimly. “I-I suppose you would have.”
Although, he thought, if Tanya hadn’t stopped him, I would have...

“Everything I am belongs to my lord husband...” Rys said, sidling up to Flio. “Really, what a terribly rude lion.”

Flio pulled Rys into a gentle hug.

Some time later, everyone had eaten their fill of Rys’s lunch, and so the party reconvened. “I tried searching for Divine Beasts in the area,” Flio said. “There still seem to be a number close by.”

“In that case,” proposed Rys, “shall we split up to search?”

“I’ll stay here in case some more of that lot shows up,” said Ghozal, folding his arms and glancing down at the ground where Lestrirtch and Gigantarobb lay bound in magic ropes. Lestrirtch, who had regained consciousness earlier, had fallen unconscious yet again at some point. Her cheeks were covered with bright red welts. “That Lestrirtch woman told me their boss is still on this world.”

“All right, Ghozal,” Flio said. “We’ll leave them to you. If anything comes up, let us know immediately with telepathy or a paired Communication Gem.”

Ghozal nodded and stayed put, while the rest of the party headed off into the forest.

◇Later—Somewhere in the Forest◇

“Damn that she-wolf’vietch!” A woman named Finvietch, who resembled a dark elf from Klyrode, ran through the forest, a large bag slung over one shoulder. “How is she still chasing me’vietch?”

Finvietch had the utmost confidence in her speed, to the point that she had often bragged, “*Not even a celestial can catch me’vietch!*” But this wolf, who had appeared from nowhere and had immediately given chase, kept on her heels no matter how hard she ran.

“I captured the Divine Beast Taiko Tanuki no problem...when suddenly *she* appears, the damn she-wolf’vietch!” she lamented.

Finvietch had just captured the divine tanuki when Rys appeared in her human form wearing a one-piece dress, shouting, “Leave the Divine Beast alone this instant!”

“Ahh’vietch?” Finvietch taunted the newcomer. “*Leave* it’vietch? Well, if that’s what you want, you’d better catch me first’vietch!” And with that, she took off running.

It had been ten minutes since their exchange, and Rys was still on Finvietch’s tail, her lupine demon form matching the dark elf’s pace. Until now, Finvietch had never met anyone who could keep up with her. Most people would disappear out of sight the second she took off. If there was one thing she could always count on, it was her ability to run away. She had expected this time to be no different. And yet here she was, being chased by this inexorable wolf.

Finvietch looked behind her in disbelief and cast the spell Accelerate, increasing her speed even further. Rys, however, showed no signs of falling behind her pace. *I-Impossible’vietch!* she thought to herself, the color draining from her face. *Nothing alive can match my speed’vietch!*

“I mustn’t keep my lord husband waiting,” Rys said. “So let’s end this here, shall we?” Finvietch’s eyes went wide—Rys’s voice was coming from right beside her. Somehow, in the blink of an eye, she had gone from just dogging Finvietch’s feet to nearly upon her.

“I-It can’t be’vietch!” she exclaimed, trying desperately to speed up.

“Hah!” Rys cried, launching a headbutt at the dark elf from the side.

“Oh no, oh no, oh nooooo’vietch!” Finvietch cried as she lost her balance and fell to the ground, kicking up an enormous plume of dust thanks to the incredible speed of the impact, and rolling along with the momentum. Finally, she came to a stop and pulled herself unsteadily to her feet. “N-No way’vietch... I don’t believe it’vietch...”

Rys, back in her human form, picked up the bag Finvietch had been carrying. Her wolf ears and tail were still on full display, leaving no doubt in Finvietch’s mind that this woman was the very same wolf who had chased her down.

“Y-You!” Finvietch demanded, holding out her arm. “Return that bag to me’vietch!”

Rys took in a deep breath and howled with a mighty, “Awoooooooooooooo!!!” An aura of malicism welled up from within her body, overwhelming Finvietch with sheer awe. This was one of the ultimate techniques of lupine kind—the Howl of Death.

“A-Ah...” Finvietch gasped. She had taken the full brunt of the deadly howl. She collapsed unconscious on the spot, eyes rolled back in her head.

Rys exhaled. “Well, that takes care of that.” She touched the gem on her ring. “My lord husband? It’s Rys. I’ve secured a Divine Beast, as well as a woman who was trying to abduct it.” She paused. “Thank you. Yes, I’ll take both of them back to camp.”

Rys hefted the bag containing the Divine Beast on her right shoulder and the unconscious Finvietch on her left, and headed off back to camp at a run. “If this were a magic beast instead of a divine one, we might be cooking it up for dinner instead!”

◇World of Ryleina—Flio’s Camp◇

H-How did this happen’dei...? A man clicked his tongue in irritation as he hid himself in the shadow of a tree, seeming to blend into the bark. Dulmzdei was his name. He looked over at the camp in front of him, where Damalynas and Tanya were tending to the Divine Beasts while Flio and Ghozal kept an eye on the still-tied-up Lestrirtch and Gigantarobb. *The plan to raid the Divine Beast*

smuggler Bundtakar's carriage went off without a hitch, and I sent my subordinates to round up the escaped Divine Beasts, but now Lestrittch and Gigantarobb have gone and gotten themselves captured'dei! Worse, it looks like these people took the Divine Beasts as well'dei...

Dulmzdei was the boss of the criminal organization known only as Dulmz. Even among the many such organizations that operated in the shadows of the Celestial Plane, the members of Dulmz were known to be particularly pernicious ruffians. They were led by Dulmz, the so-called Super Djinn, and his followers Lestrittch, Gigantarobb, and Finvietch, who were all powerful djinn themselves. Though they were few in number, each one of them was a force to be reckoned with. There were few names that the people of the Celestial Plane feared more.

Dulmzdei kept watching Ghozal and the rest from the shadows, when suddenly Rys passed by on the way to the camp. *Hwha?! Dulmzdei balked, sputtering with impotent rage. Th-The person that woman's carrying...is that Finvietch'dei?! Indeed, Rys had his subordinate Finvietch slung over her shoulder. Seriously, what is going on here'dei?! Isn't she a member of Dulmz, the criminal organization that keeps children up at night'dei?! A-And, more to the point, doesn't that mean three of our four members have been captured'dei?! That shouldn't be possible'dei!*

Dulmzdei clenched and ground his teeth. "In that case..." he grumbled, mustering his power and growing to enormous size. "It's time for me, the boss, to come to the rescue'dei!"

"Oh!" came a voice from behind. "You're the leader of these people, aren't you!"

"Ngwha?!" Dulmzdei wheeled around to see Flio looking straight at him and wearing his usual easygoing smile. "Y-You! You were over there a minute ago'dei! Wh-When did you get behind me?!" Dulmzdei was positive that the entire time he had been stealthily observing this group, Flio had been inside the camp. And yet somehow Flio had snuck behind him, without Dulmzdei sensing his presence in the slightest.

"Well, if I've been found out, there's no use hiding'dei! I'll send you flying in my giant form'dei!" Dulmzdei focused even more power into his body, which

glowed with a sinister light and grew larger still, until he towered over the nearby trees. He was now at least twenty times as large as Flio. “Dwa ha ha ha ha!” he laughed, looking down at the tiny human before him. “Tremble before the might that sent scores of Celestial Guardians scattering into the winds’dei!” He clasped his fists together and raised them high above his head, preparing to crush Flio in a single terrible blow. “I’ll grind your bones to make my bread’dei!”

“That *does* look like a pretty powerful attack...” Flio admitted as he held out his hand. A magic circle appeared around Dulmzdei’s body.

“Ngh?! What the dei?!” Dulmzdei exclaimed in distress. His body, surrounded by Flio’s magic circle, began to shrink, growing smaller and smaller. Soon the former giant came up no further than Flio’s knees. “You bastard’dei! What did you do?!” He swung his fists for all he was worth, but it seemed his enormous power had been taken from him just as surely as his giant size. No matter how hard he punched, it didn’t seem to affect Flio in the slightest. “N-No...” he gasped, panting with exertion from the attempt.

Since fighting didn’t seem to be working, Dulmzdei decided to escape. “I have your face memorized, I’ll have you know’dei!” he declared. “The next time we meet, I’ll have my revenge’dei!” With that, he turned and ran for the forest.

He didn’t make it three steps before he encountered his next obstacle. “You would be Dulmzdei, the boss of the criminal organization Dulmz, correct?” Barring his way was Zofina, wielding her angelic scythe. The diminutive Dulmzdei glanced around for an escape but realized he was surrounded. Ghozal, Rys, Hiya, and Damalynas had him utterly cornered.

“Wh-When did you...?” he began, panic setting in as he realized how bad his situation really was. His power had been sealed by Flio’s magic, he was stuck in this tiny body, and now he was completely surrounded. “Am I...in trouble...?” he gawked, an unnatural smile on his face as his legs stopped working entirely.

◇Some Time Later◇

Zofina, who had returned from the forest, walked up to Flio as the party went about their business. “Dulmzdei finally gave us a full confession,” she said. “It seems our villains got wind that the smuggler Bundtakar was using this world to carry Divine Beasts to the Celestial Plane and decided to attack their carriage

mid-transit, leading to the present incident. They nearly destroyed this entire world in their efforts to capture the Divine Beasts who fled from the carriage...” Zofina sighed deeply. “This would never have happened if the Goddess Telbyress had done her job properly and actually managed this world...”

“I’m just glad it’s over,” Flio said, grimacing at the mention of Telbyress. “Thank you, Zofina.”

“Even so...” said Ghozal, glancing to the sky as he walked over to the two. “Did those punks really damage the whole world this badly just by rampaging around a little bit?” Zofina and Flio followed Ghozal’s gaze up to see that the sky had gotten even worse. Not only was the world covered in ominous red and black clouds, but there were thin cracks of distorted space running through the sky itself. The world looked like it was a hair’s breadth from complete ruination.

Zofina knitted her brow. “You raise a good point. As powerful and bull-headed as those djinn are, it’s hard to believe that a single rampage would be enough to leave the world in such a state. I suspect that things have been deteriorating here for a while, with the Goddess Telbyress’s attention elsewhere from the world she was supposed to be governing.” She sighed again and shook her head. “For the time being, we’ll have to strip the Goddess Telbyress of her station. Perhaps this world will recover under the auspices of some other goddess. I am very grateful for your assistance in this matter. Thank you.” She bowed deeply to Flio and the rest of his party.

“It’s quite all right!” said Flio, smiling his usual smile. “I’m just happy I was able to help.”



Zofina saw the party off as they headed back to Klyrode through a portal Flio made. “Now then.” Summoning her scythe and spinning it in a dramatic circle, she made her way back to the forest where the inert lump of matter that had once been Dulmzdei was waiting for her. Behind him were Lestrirtch and the rest of the members of Dulmz, quivering in fear as the angel approached.

“W-W-We’ll tell you anything you wanna know’tch!” begged Lestrirtch.

“W-W-We aren’t hiding anything’b!” pleaded Gigantarobb.

“J-J-Just please, spare our lives’vietch!” Finvietch groveled.

Zofina closed her eyes and swung her scythe in an arc. When she opened them, she was no longer the Disciple of the Celestial Plane who had seen Flio off back to his world. She had taken on the form of an executioner. Half of her face was skeletal, while the other half was that of a young maiden. The maiden’s eye shone with an ominous light, while the skeletal eye was pitch black. She surveyed the three before her.

“Now,” she commanded, in a voice that sounded like it came from the deepest pits of Hell. “Count. How many sins have you committed? I will carve your bodies into that many parts and send you on to the Celestial Plane.”

The three could only tremble.

◇The World of Klyrode—Flio’s House◇

Flio couldn’t believe his eyes. He had returned through the portal from the world of Ryleina to find the workshop behind his house exactly as he had left it. But what drew his attention in that moment was Telbyress. She was walking down the road with wobbly legs, one hand resting on Hokh’hokton’s shoulder. Apparently, she’d been drinking.

“My lord husband...” Rys said. “That woman who gave us the request... Her name was Telbyress, was it not?”

“That’s right,” Flio nodded. “It seems she was the goddess in charge of that world after all.” He pursed his lips in a strained smile. Telbyress had yet to notice they had returned from Ryleina.

“Uh-huh! Uh-huh!” she chatted to the goblin she was using for support. “And listen to *this*, Hokh’hoky...”

“I see, I see!” the goblin chattered back, clearly drunk as well. “So what happened then?”

Hiya turned to face the pair and began striding in their direction. “Exalted One. As your humble servant Hiya had hardly anything to do in the other world, I would like to ask your permission to bring down the hammer on this no-good goddess—this no-goodness—who has done nothing but lie to you and cause you trouble.” So she asked, but the djinn who commands the origin of light and

darkness didn't wait even a second for Flio's answer before conjuring two primordial magic circles—one in each hand.

"Hiya..." Flio said. "Just try not to kill her, I guess."

Hiya nodded. A moment later, a thunderous sound came echoing, loud enough for everyone in the house to hear.

◇That Night...◇

In the two-story cottage on a corner of Blossom's farm, Hokh'hokton lay awake in his bed, pressing his hand against his head. "Hmm?" he wondered. "Now how did I end up in my bed? I must've been terribly inebriated. My memory isn't working properly..." He sat up in bed and shook his head to clear it. "I remember finishing the day's farmwork, and drinking with *someone*, but... Hmm?!"

Just then, Hokh'hokton noticed that there was someone else sleeping beside him in bed. She looked like a human woman, her hair burned and frizzy, and her face charred black. Rather than *sleeping*, it might be more correct to say she was *unconscious*.

"This raggedy woman..." Hokh'hokton folded his arms in thought, trying to piece together his memories. "Wasn't she the one I was drinking with earlier today...?"

Suddenly, the woman's eyes snapped open, and she gasped for air. "I-I thought I was gonna die! Can you believe that *djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness* or whatever they call them?! Doing something like that to me! I'm a goddess, you know!" She scrunched up her face in a pout as she checked to make sure her limbs were all still working properly.

Suddenly, all of the memories buried in Hokh'hokton's brain came flooding back. "Ngh! Y-You're Telbyress, that so-called goddess! What are you still doing in my house?!"

"Rude!" Telbyress exclaimed. "I'll have you know that I am an honest-to-goodness goddess! Worship me! Extol my virtues! Get down on your knees and lick my boots!"

"I will not! Don't be absurd!" The two butted their foreheads together as they

snapped at each other. “Regardless,” Hoky’hokton went on, “it has gotten quite late! I would very much appreciate it if you would *go home!* I have another early morning of farmwork ahead of me!” He grabbed Telbyress by the shoulders and began pushing her out of his room.

“Hey! Wait! Let’s not be too hasty here! I-If there’s something on your mind, maybe I can talk to you about it? I am a goddess, you know...” Telbyress protested, giving her most professional smile and folding her arms.

“No, thank you.” Hoky’hokton shook his head, his expression studiously neutral.

In fact, there was something weighing on his mind. His fellow goblin Maunty had a wife already, as well as a truly prodigious number of children. Every time he saw them together, his heart ached for a wife of his own. Ordinarily, he was anything but shy about telling people this, but...

As much as I want a wife, this woman is no good... Hoky’hokton thought. *Everything she does is a red flag...* Keeping his expression neutral, he once again tried to push Telbyress out of his room.

“Hold on a minute!” the goddess protested. “Why are you being so mean to me?! Y-Y’know, I really would appreciate it if you let me stay...maybe for a week or so...”

“Why?” Hoky’hokton asked. “Are you not a goddess? You really should return to your own home and get to all that important goddess work you have to do.”

“O-Oh, well... You know... I might have made a *teensy* mistake...and gotten stripped of my divinity...”

“What?”

“Isn’t it *terrible?!?*” Telbyress said, turning towards Hoky’hokton and entreating him for all she was worth. “Taking away my goddess powers all of a sudden like that! And now I’ve been exiled to this world with no more power than the average human! And worse, I’m completely broke!”

Hoky’hokton was unsympathetic. “Frankly, it sounds like it was your own fault. I don’t see why I should have to be involved at all.”

“Come *oon!*” she pleaded. “Have a little empathy, won’t you?! *Just* because I left the world I was managing alone and almost let it get destroyed...”

“Isn’t that...an incredibly serious failure?”

“Not at all! It was just a little slipup!”

“Well, be that as it may, I really would like for you to *get out of my house!*”

“Pleeeease! Don’t just leeeave me! Pleeeeease, Hokey!”

“Don’t call me ‘Hokey’! I won’t tolerate that from the likes of you!”

“Pleeeese, don’t be like that! My god! My enlightened one! My lord Hokh’hokton!”

“Just shut up!”

“I’ll worship you! I’ll extol your virtues! I’ll get down on my knees and lick your boots!”

“Know when to quit!”

And so their argument dragged on and on...

◇Meanwhile—Flio’s House◇

Flio lay in his bed, scrolling through the inventory window of his Bottomless Bag and looking over its contents.

“My lord husband?” Rys called out, looking over as she combed her hair in front of the mirror on the dresser. “What are you doing with that Bottomless Bag? It isn’t the one you usually use, right?”

“Oh,” said Flio, smiling cheerfully. “I asked Zofina to send me a portion of bone from the Beasts of Disaster they have in custody in the Celestial Plane.”

“The bone?” Rys asked. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but don’t you need the flesh of a Beast of Disaster to create that medicine of yours?”

“Yes, that’s right. But there’s something I want to try with this.”

Rys watched as her husband scrolled happily through the window. Soon, she was smiling as well. “If there’s anything I can do, my lord husband, I would be more than happy to be of assistance.”

“Thank you, Rys. That means a lot.”

That should do it... Flio thought as he read through the inventory. I should finally be able to increase our production...

Chapter 3: Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought

House Ulgo was a family of demons—one of the four great houses who served the Dark Army. During the time when Yuigarde had reigned as Dark One, however, Bacchus, the head of the family, had made the decision to join forces with Zanzibar’s rebellion and had left the Dark Army. He had hoped to make his own family the reigning power in the Dark Army, but instead he found himself crushed by Dark One Yuigarde. As a result, most of his family was arrested, and their fortunes fell to ruin.

◇Somewhere, in a Tavern◇

Demmie, the current head of the very same House Ulgo, eyed Hero Gold-Hair dubiously from a table in the far corner of the inn as he and his companions raised their typical raucousness, laughing and drinking with wild abandon. “M’lady,” said her companion, the iron-arm demon Genbushein. “That man they call Hero Gold-Hair is completely off his guard. Just say the word and I could take his head right now. If we defeated the Hero, they’d *have* to restore House Ulgo’s rights!” He seemed poised even now to rise to his feet and do the deed.

Demmie, however, only seemed alarmed by the suggestion. “W-W-W-W-Wait! Hold on!” she cried, waving her arms in a panic. “I want our rights restored as much as you, but it’s sure to go badly if we attack him with so many people around! I would hate to involve someone I’ve never even spoken to, even if it was for the family’s sake. I-I would much rather try to befriend him...”

“Hm,” Genbushein grunted. “I suppose there is some merit to your words as well...” He frowned, glancing between Hero Gold-Hair and Demmie.

Just then, Valentine, who had noticed Genbushein looking over at their table, came sauntering over his way. “Well, hello there, old man!” she said. “You’ve got a rather nice-looking body, don’t you? What do you say? Care to have a drinking contest with little miss Valentine? Hero Gold-Hair made a killing with that last magic beast he caught, and I’m in the mood to party!” She grabbed a

cask and began gulping down the liquid inside.

Valentine was just in a good mood and looking for someone to drink with—it didn't matter who it might be. But Genbushein saw it differently. "M'lady," he whispered. "This woman is clearly trying to start a fight with House Ulgo, under the pretense of a drinking contest..." He rose from his seat. "Fwah ha ha!" he laughed, stretching his shoulders as he stepped forward to meet Valentine's challenge. "You'll rue the day you challenged me! A little lady like you, outdrink *me*?! Absurd! You'll give me stitches! Here, watch this!" He seized the cask from Valentine and drained it dry in a single, heroic glug.

"Ohhh?" sang Valentine. "Not bad, not bad! All right, then, it's on! And the loser pays for all the drinks!" She grabbed one of the largest barrels—so large it typically took several workers to carry—and lifted it up with one arm like it weighed nothing, drinking furiously.

Genbushein's eyes opened wide in awe at the sight. "Nh! So you're not all talk after all, then... In that case, I'll show you what this old body can do! Genbushein will never lose to a tiny girl like you!" He grabbed a fresh cask and drained it as quickly as he had the first.

The tavern keeper gleefully watched the pair finish cask after cask. "Go! Go!" she cheered. "Oh, excellent, excellent... This will be just great for my business! You there! Keep bringing them casks!" Her staff followed her instructions with equally excited grins, keeping the contest going as a gang of onlookers started to form, taking bets on who was going to win. And, of course, the onlookers needed drinks as well. The tavern was full of voices cheering the pair on. It was shaping up to be a wild night.

◇Some Time Later◇

Genbushein clutched his cask tight as if for dear life, not moving an inch. "Oh dear, reached your limit already?" mocked Valentine, draining yet another fresh cask. "I suppose you were a lightweight after all." She had already drunk a considerable quantity of alcohol before even starting the contest, but her pace still showed no sign of flagging. She kept drinking on and on with single-minded enthusiasm.

The rest of Hero Gold-Hair's party watched Valentine's exploits from their

table a short distance away. Currently the party members were Hero Gold-Hair himself, Tsuya, who had been accompanying him since he was at Klyrode Castle, Riliangiu, a former familiar for the Realm of Evil, Wuha Gappoli, the mansion djinn, and Aryun Keats, the carriage djinn. Together with Valentine, who was off drinking with Genbushein, they were a party of six.

“That’s what happens if you challenge Valentine expecting an ordinary woman!” said Hero Gold-Hair, eyeing the motionless Genbushein as he finished off his own glass.

Across from him, Aryun Keats lay unconscious in her seat, three separate bottles still in her mouth. She had been drinking them three at a time before she collapsed in a drunken stupor. “Meanwhile, Aryun always starts strong and crashes fast!” laughed Wuha Gappoli, stealing bites of Aryun Keats’s leftover food between small sips of her own drink.

Riliangiu just stood silently, her arms folded. At a glance, it looked like she was keeping watch. But the truth is, she too had already passed out from the alcohol.

“Weeeell...” said Tsuya, holding out her glass to Hero Gold-Hair for a toast. “I guess thaaat guy’s paying the taaab tonight, so we can drink all we waaant!”



“Tsuya...” said Hero Gold-Hair, glancing her direction with a smirk as he clinked his glass against hers. “You’re quite savage when it comes to someone else’s dime, aren’t you?”

“Of cooourse!” said Tsuya. “I’m in chaaarge of the party’s fiiinances, after all! I’ll take aaany excuse!” She finished the rest of her glass in one gulp and called over a waitress right away to order more. “Excuuuse me! Get me the beeest drink you have!”

Meanwhile, at the table in the corner, things were as different as you could imagine from the party-like atmosphere at Hero Gold-Hair’s table.

“Wake up! Please, Genbushein, open your eyes!” Demmie pleaded, her hands clasped together in desperate prayer. But her companion had gone utterly still. He wasn’t even twitching. “Please, you have to get up! You can’t lose! I can’t afford to pay for all those drinks!”

Tears streamed down her eyes as she wished with all her heart, but in the end her prayers were in vain. Genbushein had drunk far, *far* beyond his limits. He wouldn’t be getting up anytime soon.

◇Later...◇

Valentine stood before the tavern, the clear winner of the drinking contest. “Well?” she said, still drinking from another full cask. “Anybody else wish to challenge me? I’ll take you on, wherever and whenever!”

“You’re out of this world, miss!” cheered one of the onlookers.

“Where does she keep it all, with that slender body of hers...?” wondered another.

“Who cares?” said another. “All hail the queen!”

Basking in the praise, Valentine finished off yet another drink as the rest of Hero Gold-Hair’s party prepared themselves for another round of feasting.

And amidst the scene in the tavern, a certain waitress was making the rounds. “W-Welcome...” she said, greeting a new arrival. This was none other than Demmie, the current head of House Ulgo, wearing an apron like the rest of the

tavern staff. Unfortunately, since Genbushein had suffered a decisive loss in the drinking contest, and since she wasn't carrying nearly enough money to pay off the tab, she had no recourse but to agree to work as a waitress until she could pay back the rest of the bill.

Nhhh... Demmie cried internally. *How could things come to this? To think that I, the head of House Ulgo, would have to work at a place where they make the waitresses wear such short skirts? And why is there this big opening in the outfit's chest?!* She could feel herself blushing as she worked, embarrassed to be walking around the room in such a scanty outfit. Her eyes stayed fixed on the ground as she walked.

"Hey now!" said the tavern keeper, smacking Demmie's back with a boisterous laugh. "A pretty girl like you oughta walk with her back straight and head high!"

"Y-Y-Yes ma'am!" Demmie exclaimed, snapping to attention with a start.

Two workers glanced over from the kitchen—the golem Rozen Laurel, and the cottonflower demon fencer Rosalina. The two were some of the few remaining vassals of House Ulgo.

"That *fiend*..." hissed Rozen Laurel. "How dare he treat our lady like that! Hero Gold-Hair has made an enemy today."

"I quite agree," Rosalina whispered back as she continued to clean plates. "What would I give to slice him to bits..."



After closing, Demmie stayed in the tavern to clean while Rozen Laurel and Rosalina kept on washing dishes in the kitchen. Genbushein lay on the sofa with unfocused eyes, muttering "It's so stuffy in here... Wanna get out..." before falling into incoherence.

"Ahh..." Demmie sighed. "What should I do? One night of work won't be enough to cover it, huh?" Hero Gold-Hair's party had kept drinking and eating straight up until it was time for the tavern to close, and Demmie was being forced to foot the bill for all of it. It was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

"How dare he make our lady cry..." Rozen Laurel muttered, glancing over

from the kitchen and crying bitter tears of her own.

“I may have to slice him to bits after all...” agreed Rosalina, crying herself as well.

“You three can go home,” said the tavern keeper, walking up to the House Ulgo party. “Good job tonight.”

“What?” Demmie, Rozen Laurel, and Rosalina all stared in disbelief.

“B-But we still haven’t earned enough to pay back the rest of the tab...” protested Demmie.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” the tavern keeper said. “That golden-haired man paid the full sum when he left.” Then she set one of the tables with four hot meals—one for each of them. “You worked hard today. Get yourself some food.” And with that, she went back to the tavern’s backroom.

Demmie looked over at the food the tavern keeper had set for them. “A golden-haired man?” she repeated. “That has to be Hero Gold-Hair, right?”



While the head of House Ulgo was settling down for a meal, Hero Gold-Hair’s party was staying at a riverside inn some distance away from the tavern.

“We used to have to camp at times like this,” Hero Gold-Hair remarked. “But thanks to Wuha Gappoli’s ability to turn into buildings, now we can live in luxury!”

“Ah ha ha,” laughed a psychic voice coming from the building itself. “Keep praising me, and maybe I won’t digest you with my stomach acid!”

“Hey!” Hero Gold-Hair replied. “Don’t even joke about that!” Despite their words, Wuha and Gold-Hair were in good humor. They were both pleasantly drunk and enjoying the banter.

“Hero Gooold-Hair!” Tsuya whined, sidling up beside him. “Whyyy did you give our money to the girl who loost?” She looked absolutely outraged as she checked on the state of their finances.

“Ha ha ha!” Hero Gold-Hair laughed, patting Tsuya on the shoulder. “I just felt bad for them, getting wrapped up in a contest they had no way of winning!

They paid what money they had, so I see no reason to go hard on them.”

“I gueeeess that’s true...” Tsuya admitted, pouting sulkily. “But if I had knooown you were gonna do that, I would’ve held baaack a little on the food and driiink...”

“You really are savage on someone else’s dime...” Hero Gold-Hair said, smiling in amusement.

Around them, the rest of the party was sleeping peacefully in their beds.

◇The Next Morning◇

The four members of House Ulgo slept in an inn off of the back roads in a run-down part of town, all four of them in one room.

“M’lady...” Genbushein hung his head before the head of the family as she sat in bed. “I am truly ashamed of my conduct last night. Not only did I lose to a member of Hero Gold-Hair’s party, but we were forced to accept charity from the likes of them...”

“We must not take this lying down!” declared Rosalina, raising her sword. “I, the cottonflower demon swordfighter Rosalina, shall send them to their doom with my flowering sword techniques!”

“And I, the golem Rozen Laurel, will use my sheer strength to pound them into dust!” said Rozen Laurel, crossing her fists in front of her chest in a dramatic pose.

“Well...” Demmie said, glancing over the room. “More to the point, let’s not bet any more of our money on contests like that. We don’t have a lot left as it is...” She squeezed the nearly empty coin purse tight in her hand.

“Don’t worry about that, Lady Demmie!” Rozen Laurel said, pumping her fists and posing like a bodybuilder. “Once we claim the bounty for defeating Hero Gold-Hair, we’ll restore our name and resolve our money problems in one go!”

“On that note,” said Demmie, looking Rozen Laurel’s way, “I don’t suppose you know where Hero Gold-Hair and his party went?”

Rosalina and Rozen Laurel both began glancing awkwardly around the room at that question. “Well...” started Rosalina. “About that...”

“None of the inns we went to said they had anyone like that staying there.”

Demmie sighed. “In that case, we should start by looking for Hero Gold-Hair. But first, let’s take a rest. The two of you have been up all night looking for him, after all.”

“L-Lady Demmie...”

“You’re so good to us...”

The pair couldn’t help themselves from crying tears of passion at Demmie’s kindness.

◇Still Morning◇

Hero Gold-Hair and company made their way along the road in the carriage-transformed Aryun Keats.

“Ahhh,” Aryun sighed telepathically. *“Liquor truly is the chief of all medicine! After all the drinking I did last night, my transformative abilities are in tip-top shape!”* Indeed, her carriage form seemed to be a little more lavish than usual. But everyone else seemed decidedly uncomfortable as they rolled along.

“Keats...” said Hero Gold-Hair, holding his nose and furrowing his brow. “I’m glad you’re feeling well, but this whole carriage reeks of booze...” The other members of the party were acting similarly, holding their noses or covering their faces with their hands.

“What a horrible thing to say, Sir Hero Gold-Hair!” Aryun protested. *“You mustn’t tell a girl such a thing! That’s sexual harassment!”*

“If you’re gonna make a fuss about being a girl,” Hero Gold-Hair said, casting open the carriage window, “then stop drinking until you stink!”

The stench of alcohol wafting from inside the carriage filled the forest as they traveled along, leaving the town behind them with Demmie and her companions still fast asleep in the inn, unaware that they had let them slip between their fingers.

◇Some Days Later◇

The party arrived in another town in due time and set out at once to relax in the local tavern, when a human woman appeared before them. “Excuse me,”

she said, pressing her glasses up the ridge of her nose with her index finger. “Might I have a word with Hero Gold-Hair?”

Hero Gold-Hair recognized the woman despite the human form she’d assumed. “You...” he began. “You’re Phufun, right? Dark One Dawkson’s minion?”

“I am,” she said. “I come to you today to request your assistance with a certain matter...”

“Hmm...” Hero Gold-Hair grunted. “Well, at the very least I’ll hear you out.”

Phufun nodded her head, adjusted her glasses once again, and began...



Hero Gold-Hair furrowed his brow in consternation as Phufun finished her story. “Is that all true?”

“Yes,” Phufun answered. “There is no doubt about it. My master, the Dark One Lord Dawkson, ordered myself and the Infernals Lord Zanzibar and Lady Belianna to investigate the sudden increase in missing person cases, and we’ve discovered that a certain organization has been abducting demons to use as test subjects for their experiments. Yes, I am quite certain...”

Tsuya, who was standing next to Hero Gold-Hair, scowled at the news. “You knooow...” she said. “I heard there used to be a kiiingdom that used huumans as test subjects like that. But it turned out to be suuuper dangerous, so they banned it a looong time ago...”

“I’ve heard as much myself,” said Phufun. “It seems that a group of researchers from that kingdom have joined forces with several demons to restart their experiments in secret.” She placed a crystal on the table in front of them and held out her hand. The crystal responded to her gesture, displaying images of three kidnapping victims. “The most recent case involved these three. One boy and two girls. They are all scions of one of the great houses among demonkind, and possess uncommon magical power.”

Hero Gold-Hair peered into the crystal as Tsuya and the rest tried to get as good a look as they could from behind. “I see... But can’t the Dark Army rescue these people? Why are you asking us?”

“Well...” said Phufun. “As it happens, their laboratory is within the borders of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. We can’t dispatch the Dark Army.”

“Makes sense,” Hero Gold-Hair replied. “The humans and demons signed a peace treaty only a little while ago. I can imagine it would cause all sorts of problems to send an army into human territory now of all times.”

Phufun nodded and opened her mouth to continue, but suddenly, the tavern began to shake violently.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” demanded Hero Gold-Hair.

“I don’t know!” said Wuha, looking out the window. “It looks like some weird purplish thing is attacking the tavern!”

Hero Gold-Hair rushed to the window to get a look himself. “Wh-What is *that*?!” Before his eyes stood what could only be a bizarre magic beast. It had a long, slender purple body, and a score of long tubes protruded from its back.

“Grooooooooooar!” the thing wailed, smashing at the surrounding buildings with its sharp appendages. It wasn’t just attacking the inn, but *everything* nearby.

“That magic beast...” Phufun muttered, adjusting her glasses as she looked out the window herself. “Could the organization have sent it after me for looking into the kidnappings?!”

The purple thing flailed its arms wildly, ferociously attacking everything nearby, when suddenly, with a *khrck* sound, a large hole appeared in the ground beneath the monster’s feet. It fell, its right leg caught in the hole, until it was stuck in the ground and could no longer move.

“Phew!” said Hero Gold-Hair, sighing with relief. “I made it just in time!” He had emerged from the floor of the tavern through a giant hole, his face and clothing covered in dirt, holding the legendary item: the Drilldozer Shovel.

While the monster had been rampaging with its deadly arms, Hero Gold-Hair had been digging underground, all the way to under its feet. He felled the beast with a well-placed pitfall trap and appeared back inside instantly. This super high-speed underground movement was an ability granted to him by his legendary item.

“You did it, Hero Gold-Hair!” Tsuya clapped her hands, jumping for joy.

“No time for that!” Hero Gold-Hair barked. “Valentine!”

“Just leave it to me, Hero Gold-Hair!” Valentine replied, weaving threads of darkness with her left and right hands. “Now, settle down!” she shouted, swinging both hands in front of her together, causing the threads to wrap tight around the immobilized magic beast. “Wah ha ha ha ha!” she cackled at a high pitch. “After that feast the other night, my threads are stronger than ever!”

Wrapped in thread, the magic beast looked like an enormous cocoon as it writhed in pain. “It wouldn’t do to leave it here,” said Valentine. “Shall I finish it off?” She crossed her arms, causing the dark threads to tighten, when a great magic circle appeared on the ground next to the magic beast, and another magic beast appeared—this one blue. “A-Another one?!” Valentine exclaimed, quickly readying a fresh batch of threads. But before she could act, the blue magic beast’s right arm transformed, sharpening like a knife. It cut through the threads trapping the purple one.

“Gh!” exclaimed Hero Gold-Hair, readying the Drilldozer Shovel once more. But as they watched, the blue magic beast took the purple one in its arms, still wrapped in Valentine’s cocoon, and vanished back through the magic circle.

Hero Gold-Hair’s party stared out the window in disbelief. “What in the world was that?”

Phufun pressed her glasses back up the ridge of her nose. “This is only a guess...” she said. “But perhaps that is the fruit of that laboratory’s research. Turning demons into magic beasts...”



“Ow ow ow ow ow...” Wuha Gappoli protested as Tsuya tended to her injuries. She had been hurt by some of the falling rubble. “Be a little gentler, jeez!”

“Oooh!” said Tsuya. “I’m soooorry!”

Around them, Aryun Keats and Riliangiu were doing what they could to treat the people who had been injured. And nearby, Hero Gold-Hair and Phufun were having a conversation.

“So you know something about those magic beasts?” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “From your investigations?”

“I do.” Phufun held out her crystal, showing Hero Gold-Hair images of the selfsame blue monster they had seen earlier. “It seems they had been researching ways to turn humans into giant magic beasts, until they decided that demons were more suitable to the process and switched test subjects. This image is a picture of a beast they produced as a result.”

“So then, what are they going to *do* with all these magic beasts they’re producing?” asked Hero Gold-Hair.

“Most likely,” said Phufun, “they intend to sell them as weapons of war...”

At this point, Aryun Keats walked up to them, interrupting their conversation. She gave a smart bow with her usual rigid poise. “Forgive me if I am speaking out of turn,” she said, “but perhaps we should not waste more time on idle conversation. I, the carriage djinn Aryun Keats, am ready to depart for this laboratory at once!”

“Yes, I agree...” said Hero Gold-Hair. “But, Phufun, do you know where this laboratory is, exactly?”

Phufun shook her head, holding her glasses in place with her index finger. “We identified several likely locations, but they all turned out to be nothing more than laboratory outposts. Their main base still eludes us...”

“Mrh!” Aryun Keats stomped her foot. “How vexing!”

Hero Gold-Hair folded his arms in thought.

“Sir,” said Riliangiu, approaching the three of them. “I believe I can use my Search ability to locate the presence of the magic beast from earlier.”

“I see!” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Then let’s get moving at once!”

“Yes, sir!” Aryun Keats bowed again before transforming into a carriage. The rest of the party, along with Phufun, did a quick check to make sure there were no more injured people in need of help, and got on board.

◇Some Time Later—In a Forest◇

The remnants of House Ulgo, who had been busy looking for leads on Hero

Gold-Hair's location, found themselves fleeing through the trees for dear life.

"Wh-What in the world is that red magic beast?!" Demmie cried, tears in her eyes as she ran for dear life. "Why is it attacking us all of a sudden?!"

Behind her were the iron-arm demon Genbushein, the golem Rozen Laurel, and the cottonflower demon fencer Rosalina. And farther behind them was a strangely elongated red magic beast, long tubes protruding from its back, using its four limbs to chase after them at breakneck speeds.

"A-As long as I've lived, I've never seen anything like it..." muttered Genbushein. The old iron-arm demon stopped and turned around to face it. "Rosalina! Rozen Laurel! I leave m'lady to you! I'll stop this thing!" He focused power into his arms, which grew and grew until they were truly massive hunks of metal. "Take this, you beast!" he shouted, swinging his arms all around, but the red beast leapt deftly out of his reach. Scores of tiny white magic beasts with wings emerged from its back, flying at Genbushein from all directions.

"Ngh!" Genbushein exclaimed. "Afraid to face me yourself?! Coward!" Gritting himself, he swung his arms and knocked the white beasts out of the air. The red magic beast lowered itself for an attack. "N-No!" Genbushein had been too focused on the white flying magic beasts to react in time. "Gwaaah!" he cried as the beast struck him head-on, sending him flying back and toppling a row of trees with the force.

The white ones swarmed Genbushein as he fell, pummeling him furiously as he lay on the ground. He did his best to guard, but there were too many to stop, mercilessly targeting the gaps in his defense. "They're weaker than the red one, but damned if they don't have numbers! Gah! Ouch!"

"That's enough!" Demmie turned around and leapt at the white magic beasts, wielding her scythe—the traditional weapon of a devil like herself—and carving a wide arc through the air. There was a sound like ice cracking, and a moment later, the white magic beasts were sent flying like they had been blasted away. "Genbushein! Are you all right?"

Genbushein pulled himself to his feet as Demmie ran up with her scythe. "Nothing to worry about, m'lady!" He laughed. "I'm just glad for the opportunity to see one of your splendid counterattacks!"

Demmie sighed with relief to see Genbushein in such high spirits. But in that moment, she let down her guard. Suddenly, she felt something blunt strike her on the back of the head. “Ah...” was all she could say before she fell unconscious.

“M-M’lady!” Back on his feet, Genbushein chased after the red magic beast as it screeched with triumph, carrying Demmie’s unconscious body under its arm as it vanished into the trees. “You scoundrel! Give m’lady back!”

Rosalina and Rozen Laurel followed shortly behind.

“Stop!” cried Rosalina.

“I’ll beat you to a pulp!” shouted Rozen Laurel.

The rest of the white flying magic beasts that Demmie hadn’t taken out with her attack darted in to block their path. “Out of our way!” exclaimed Rosalina, cutting her way through the swarm. The cottonflower demon looked fluffy and harmless from the outside, but her sword skills were the real deal. Genbushein and Rozen Laurel helped too, clobbering as many of the white beasts as they could.

As hard as the three fought, however, there were simply too many of the white things for them to handle. They had started out strong, but they soon found themselves driven back.

“I knew it...” Rozen Laurel lamented. “There’s no way...”

“What are you saying?!” Genbushein huffed, full of bravado even as sweat ran down his brow. “We’ll turn the tide any second!” But things were looking bad. The magic beasts descended from the sky, landing all around them, when suddenly...

Khrck!

Hole after hole began appearing beneath the white beasts’ feet, sending them plummeting into the earth. A number of them flapped their wings as hard as they could to avoid falling, but all they received for their trouble was a shovel strike on the head. “And stay down!” bellowed Hero Gold-Hair. They fell, impaling themselves on the spikes lining the bottom of the pit.

House Ulgo stared in disbelief at the man smacking magic beasts back into the hole with his shovel as they did their best to escape. “You’re...Hero Gold-Hair...” muttered Genbushein. Indeed, the man wielding the Drilldozer Shovel could be no one else. “Wh-What are you doing here? No... First, I should thank you for coming to our rescue.” He bowed his head, teeth gritted tight. Rozen Laurel and Rosalina followed suit, bowing as well.

“Never mind that. We have bigger fish to fry...” Hero Gold-Hair stepped up to the edge of the pit and looked down. “Following that monster’s presence led us here,” he observed, cocking his head as he peered into the pit. “But what in the world are *those* things?”

Phufun leaned down to touch one of the white magic beasts. A magic circle appeared around her hand, enabling her to analyze its structure. “From a preliminary examination, their rudimentary structure bears a resemblance to the purple and blue magic beasts we encountered earlier...” she said, pressing her glasses back up the ridge of her nose. “If I had to guess, I would say these are inferior, or else mass-produced models. See, their fists and jaws have been abnormally hardened, leaving their core body fragile. Perhaps they are designed for pure attacking power, with no thought whatsoever for defense...” She adjusted her glasses once again as she concluded her analysis.

“So that’s the sort of thing they’re making...” Hero Gold-Hair muttered darkly, folding his arms. “We’d better hurry before something worse happens!”

“Then what’s your plan, my dear Hero Gold-Hair?” asked Valentine. “The scumbags who made these things have their headquarters in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, no? Aren’t you worried about getting more items added to your criminal record?” Hero Gold-Hair was a wanted criminal throughout the human world for stealing treasure from Klyrode Castle, as well as releasing a dangerous djinn and the Grand Magus of Midnight from their seals.

Hero Gold-Hair turned to face Valentine. “Who cares about that?” he scoffed. “This whole affair is causing all sorts of problems for Dawkson! I can’t just leave it be!”

“Hee hee!” Valentine laughed happily. “I had a feeling that would be your answer, my Hero Gold-Hair!”

“Hero Gold-Hair...” said Genbushein, who had been listening in on the conversation. “Forgive me for eavesdropping, but are you heading for this group’s headquarters? That red magic beast abducted m’lady!”

“We need to save her at once!” agreed Rosalina, worry in her voice.

“Next time I see them, I’ll snap their spines in half!” said Rozen Laurel, pressing her fists together in front of her chest.

Hero Gold-Hair looked over the remnants of House Ulgo. “Hmm... Well, I understand how you feel. But I’m afraid we don’t have any idea where their headquarters actually is.”

The three House Ulgo members slumped their shoulders in disappointment.

“Hee hee hee...” Valentine chuckled, a mysterious grin on her face. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that!”

“Y-You found something?” Hero Gold-Hair, as well as the members of House Ulgo, turned to face Valentine as she held up her finger. Attached was a single thin dark thread, leading somewhere far off into the distance.

“I simply attached this to that red magic beast earlier!” she said. “Not bad, hm?”

“Then...” said Gold-Hair. “That thread should lead us to their home base?”

Valentine nodded decisively.

◇Later◇

A woman wearing a black mage’s robe turned in her seat to face the old man in a white mage’s robe standing behind her. “Tell me, Vintermann,” she said. “How fare our demon magic beasts?”

The man called Vintermann stood up straight as he replied, his arms folded neatly behind his back. “The experiment is proceeding on schedule, Creatrix Auncor, and we have succeeded in achieving mass production as well. However...”

“You’re concerned about the test subject who went on that rampage?” the creatrix guessed. Vintermann nodded.

“They are meant to treat their operator’s commands with absolute obedience,” he said. “We can’t sell them if they’re going to lose control like that...”

“Have you identified the cause?”

“Most likely, the original demon was lacking in affinity. I hypothesize that utilizing demons with greater magical power will resolve the issue.”

As Auncor and Vintermann discussed the matter, two women stepped up from behind them to join the conversation, both dressed in matching black gothic lolita-style outfits. “What are you two whispering about over here?” the shorter one asked. “You’ll have the demon magic beasts ready by the deadline, won’t you? We already have a buyer, you know? Both the white beasts and the demon beasts must be ready to ship by the agreed date.” As she spoke, she began doing calculations on her oversized abacus, clacking the beads back and forth.

The other woman opened her eyes to reveal two pitch-black orbs. “And until then it’s work, work, work!” she sang, twirling her body in a strange dance.

Vintermann clicked his tongue in irritation, too quietly for the two women to hear. “We are very grateful for the Shadow Conglomerate’s assistance. We will deliver the demon magic beasts as promised.”

“All is well,” said Auncor in a quiet voice. “There is no problem. After all...” She glanced at the crystal in front of her, displaying an image of the red magic beast on standby in a large laboratory, grasping an unconscious Demmie in one of its arms. “We’ve just captured a demon with a tremendous amount of magic power. She will be the perfect material.”



“Where...am I?” Demmie, the young girl serving as the current head of House Ulgo, opened her eyes in utter darkness. She was bound to a cross-shaped platform, her arms held out at her sides and a magic collar around her neck. With her limbs and neck restrained, she found herself totally unable to move her body.

A devil like Demmie could have easily broken free from the likes of rope

bindings or steel shackles, but the magic collar around her neck was a first-class restraint. It sealed her power, leaving her unable to bring her strength to bear. Nonetheless, Demmie struggled to escape for all she was worth.

“Ah, the demon girl. I see you’ve awoken.” A woman stepped out from the darkness in front of Demmie. She had a very peculiar appearance—it was impossible to say whether she was as young as twenty or as old as fifty—and was wearing a black suit.

Demmie glared daggers as the woman slowly stepped towards her. “Who are you?” she demanded. “Release me at once!”

The woman did no such thing. Instead, she grabbed the sleeve of Demmie’s outfit and ripped it violently.

“Eeek!” Demmie cried, blushing with embarrassment at having her clothing torn even as she continued to protest. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

The woman, however, did not give Demmie a response. Instead she spoke to someone in the darkness behind her. “Vintermann,” she said as she unceremoniously ripped Demmie’s clothing right off her body. “Didn’t I tell you to remove the test subject’s clothing before we begin the demon beast fusion procedure?”

Vintermann, an old man who was now donning a white suit, stepped up beside the woman. “But Creatrix Auncor,” he said, cocking his head in confusion, “the clothing will dissolve during the course of the procedure regardless.”

Auncor shot Vintermann a glare. “Even so, we must remove all unidentified materials from the experiment site, no matter how small. I expect all of our preparations to be at one hundred percent efficiency at all times. Don’t tell me you simply ran out of time?”

“My apologies...” Vintermann said, bowing his head low.

Demmie, who was now completely naked, lowered her head, blushing furiously. Auncor inspected her body from head to toe, causing Demmie to squirm with humiliation at her gaze. “Fascinating...” Auncor muttered quietly to herself. “So demons experience shame as well, do they...?”

“O-Of course we do!” Demmie shot back, tears in her eyes and anger in her voice. “Now let me go! And give me something to cover myself with!”

Creatrix Auncor raised her arm. “There’s nothing to worry about. That shame of yours will be gone in only a moment.” At her signal, three demon children stepped forward, one boy dressed in purple and two girls, one dressed in blue and the other in red, leading a magic beast. The magic beast wore the same collar as Demmie, its mouth was covered, and its limbs were bound together to restrict its movements. The three children were utterly expressionless as they led it along.

Auncor removed the bonds on the beast’s mouth. It let out a low rumbling roar and turned its attention to the immobilized Demmie. “Grrrrrrrr...”

“A-Ah!” Demmie cried, frightened by the look the beast was giving her. A long, hollow tongue protruded from its mouth, attaching itself to Demmie’s head and spreading out to envelop her entire body. “S-S-Stop! Wait! Gaaah!” Demmie shouted, but soon her mouth was covered by the beast’s tongue, leaving her unable to speak.

Auncor watched dispassionately as the tongue enveloped Demmie’s body all the way down to the waist. “What is the fusion rate?”

Vintermann opened a magic window to check. “Incredible...” he said, his eyes opening wide. “The fusion rate is over two hundred percent. These are higher numbers than we’ve seen in any human or demon test subject to date.”

The corners of Auncor’s mouth twitched upwards in a slight smile as she nodded triumphantly at the news. “Then we’ll be able to make our delivery to the Shadow Conglomerate on time after all. We’ll use the money to increase our production of demon beasts, and soon the very world will... Hm?” Suddenly, she interrupted her train of thought and glanced over at the three expressionless demon children. Something was stuck to the girl in red’s clothing around the hip. Auncor reached out to touch it and found a thin thread leading away out of the door the children had come in from. “This thread could be a bad sign. Vintermann, investigate—”

She cut herself off. It was quiet, but she thought she heard a voice from somewhere. Creatrix Auncor looked up and down and all around, trying to

pinpoint where it had come from. A second later, she heard the voice again, this time clear as day.

“Now!” a man bellowed, and the laboratory wall immediately blasted apart with a terrible clamor.

“Wh-What is this?!” Auncor exclaimed. Before her eyes was a veritable tank, its magic cannon at the ready. “A Magitank...” she muttered, backing away. “The ancient magitech weapon from another world... I had heard rumors that Germaniana was secretly working on its reconstruction, but to think it would already be complete!”

The carriage djinn Aryun Keats had the ability to transform into any vehicle she had ever laid hands on. The Magitank was just one of the many forms in her repertoire.

“Ha ha ha!” Aryun laughed telepathically. *“Walls are no obstacle to the carriage djinn Aryun Keats! My Magitank form blasts them all away!”*

“M’lady! Are you hurt?!” Genbushein the iron-arm demon ran into the room with the rest of the House Ulgo retainers, followed by Hero Gold-Hair’s party.

The boy in purple began to tremble at the sight of Hero Gold-Hair and Valentine. “A-A-Ah...” he stuttered. “Falling...hole... Threads...hurt... No... No!”

“Not again! It’s out of control!” Creatrix Auncor ran towards the boy, but before she could reach him, he let out a loud wail, growing in size and turning back into the purple magic beast Hero Gold-Hair’s party had encountered earlier. The girls in blue and red reverted to their magic beast forms as well in some kind of chain reaction. The laboratory room, however, was too small to hold the demon beasts’ massive bodies—they began to break through the ceiling as they grew.

“Hero Gold-Hair! Watch out!” The mansion djinn Wuha Gappoli quickly transformed her body into a small hut, protecting Hero Gold-Hair’s party and the House Ulgo retainers from falling rubble.

The room now in ruins, the three magic beasts turned to face Wuha, leaping to tear her down.

“This won’t do!” cried Hero Gold-Hair. “Wuha! Turn back!”

“Yessir!” said Wuha, quickly turning back to her humanoid form.

“All right, you beasts!” shouted Hero Gold-Hair, brandishing the Drilldozer Shovel. “The lot of you can sleep at the bottom of a hole!” He struck the shovel on the laboratory floor.

The demon magic beasts stopped their attack and leapt back at the sight, apparently afraid of the shovel in Hero Gold-Hair’s hands. They kept their distance, wailing with their horrible voices.

“That shovel you’re holding...” Auncor narrowed her eyes as she looked in Hero Gold-Hair’s direction. “Is that the legendary item, the Drilldozer Shovel?”

“And what if it is?” Hero Gold-Hair replied.

“We have the lady!” said Rosalina, interrupting. Next to her, Rozen Laurel was holding Demmie in her arms, wrapped in her own cape. The head of House Ulgo’s body was limp, seemingly unconscious.

“Great!” Hero Gold-Hair called out. “Now, let’s get out of here! Hurry, Keats! And Valentine! You keep them where they are!”

“Yes, sir!” Aryun Keats nodded.

“Just leave it to me!” replied Valentine.

Aryun transformed into a carriage as Valentine released an array of dark threads from her fingertips, wrapping them around nearly everything in the ruined laboratory.

“Wh-What is this?!” Auncor demanded. Unable to move her body, she simply glared at Valentine. The magic beasts were bound as well, unable to move or do much of anything but continue their horrible wailing.

“Au revoir, everyone!” chirped Valentine, stepping towards the carriage, only to find her way blocked. A girl had stepped in front of her path, smoothing back her silver hair and regarding Valentine with a piercing, expressionless gaze. “And you are?” Valentine asked, furrowing her brow.

“What trouble...” the girl muttered. “My only role is to cast the spell that fuses the demon with the magic beast. Why must I bother myself with nonsense like dealing with intruders?” Sighing, she took a step towards

Valentine. “Well, no matter. I don’t mind performing a song of battle from time to time. Perhaps I’ll show you what I can do.” Her right arm elongated as she spoke, lashing out like a whip.

“Oh? Is that all?” Valentine taunted, severing the arm. “Wait...what?!” The girl’s detached arm simply continued past Valentine’s guard, wrapping around her and immobilizing her body.

“Hee hee!” the girl laughed, dancing around and waving her reconstructed arm like a conductor’s baton. “My melody is sublime, you know! But I suppose you can’t hear it yet, can you?” Her fingernails elongated to claws, and she moved to stab Valentine.

“Good job Dablys,” said Auncor, still unable to move thanks to Valentine’s dark threads. “Don’t harm that woman further. We’re taking her with us.”

“Such a busybody...” Dablys sighed, glancing over Auncor. “Well, all right.” She turned her nails back to normal and went to retrieve Valentine, unwrapping her. “Wh-What?” A worried expression crossed her face. Inside the arm was not Valentine at all, but one of the hefty logs they kept in the corner of the room.

Suddenly, she heard Hero Gold-Hair’s voice, coming from the main pile of logs. Looking again, there was a hole underneath. “Valentine! Riliangiu! Now!”

“You caught me off guard last time,” said Valentine, leaping out from underground. “But it won’t happen again!”

“Lady Valentine!” said Riliangiu, emerging next. “I’ll provide support!”

The moment before Dablys’s arm wrapped around Valentine, Hero Gold-Hair had used the Drilldozer Shovel to swap her out with a nearby log. He jumped out after Valentine and Riliangiu, brandishing the shovel in a high guard as the three advanced on Dablys.

“Th-The Drilldozer Shovel?!” Dablys recoiled in shock at the sight of the weapon in Hero Gold-Hair’s hands. “How?! Why?!” Up until that point, Dablys had been expressionless, seemingly without emotion, but now she was in a panic.

“I knew it,” said Hero Gold-Hair, nodding to himself. “I had a sense those magic beasts were afraid of the Drilldozer Shovel! And it seems you’re the

same! Well, what's the matter? Can't handle my trusty shovel?"

Dablys's face twisted in rage. "Unforgivable!" she howled, her body shaking violently. "I won't allow such dissonant notes in my presence!"

Valentine and Riliangiu stood facing off against her, when suddenly Hero Gold-Hair grabbed Valentine by the arm. "That's enough! Let's retreat for now!"

"But Hero Gold-Hair!" Valentine protested. "I wanted to show you what I can do!"

"Don't push yourself! You're nearly out of magic!"

"Huh?" Valentine's eyes shot open with the realization. She was so short on magic, in fact, that her body had shrunk from her usual voluptuous adult self to a flat-chested young girl.

Valentine was a djinn hailing from the Realm of Evil. In order to sustain a physical body in the world of Klyrode, she needed to absorb vast amounts of magical energy every day. Her threads of darkness in particular depleted her magic in the blink of an eye. Hero Gold-Hair had sensed that Valentine was about to push herself past her limits in her determination to defeat her opponent, and gave the order to retreat at once.

"All right, Keats!" Hero Gold-Hair barked. "Let's go!"

"Yes, sir!" The carriage accelerated at once to top speed, zooming away through the wrecked laboratory wall.

"Perhaps we should use that Magitank cannon of Aryun's to blast this dreadful place to smithereens?" Valentine suggested.

"I would rather not," said Aryun. "I use my own magic to fire that cannon, you know. If I use it too much, I'll run out of magic as well! I've already used quite a bit breaking through that wall..."

"So it only *looks* like an impressive weapon..." Wuha muttered, pursing her lips with disappointment.

And so, Hero Gold-Hair's party escaped, riding in Aryun Keats.

Dablys heaved a heavy sigh. "And things were going so well...but never mind.

They won't evade me." She took off after them, only for Auncor to stop her before she took more than a step.

"Wait," Auncor said. "There's no reason to overexert ourselves." She held up her hand, revealing a magic item—a small bundle of thread. "How does the saying go? An eye for an eye...and a thread for a thread."



Aryun Keats sped away from Creatrix Auncor's laboratory, escaping into the forest. Inside, Valentine was devouring an entire feast by herself with extraordinary fervor. The party kept Tsuya's Bottomless Bag well stocked with food in case Valentine needed emergency rations.

"Ahh..." Valentine sighed. "It looks like we made it just in time..." Her body was growing steadily bigger as she ate, but at a very slow pace. Eating food, unfortunately, was a very inefficient way for Valentine to absorb the magic energy she needed.

"Good," said Hero Gold-Hair, sitting across from her in the carriage. "So, how much more do you have to eat before you go back to normal?"

"Hmm... *Munch munch...*" Valentine said, speaking between mouthfuls of food. "If all I have to recover with is food...*gobble snarf...* Around twenty times this much, I suppose..."

"T-Twenty tiimes?! " Tsuya reeled, her eyes going wide. "I-I brought pleenty of food, but not thaaat much!"

"I see...*crunch gulp...* Well, if we had some magic gems, I could get it done with a lot less...*chew chew chew...*" Valentine didn't stop eating for a second the entire time she spoke.

"Magic gems? I have one right here," Phufun offered, taking out a particularly large specimen. "My master, Lord Dawkson, told me you might need this, Lady Valentine. He personally charged it with his own magic."

"Oh, that Dawkson! He's so thoughtful!" Valentine gushed, snatching the magic gem out of Phufun's hand and swallowing it in a single gulp. For a second, nothing happened. Then, with an audible *poof*, her body suddenly returned to its usual size. "Dawkson's magic really is the best," she remarked, grinning as

she looked over her body to make sure everything was still there. “This should tide me over for some time.”

Thank gooodness... Tsuya thought, sighing with relief. *It didn't even cost us any moooney...*

“Well then,” said Phufun, pressing her false glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Now that Lady Valentine has recovered, what is our next move? We’ve found the enemy’s headquarters, but now that they know we’re aware of them, they will likely move their operation to a different location.”

“First, let me ask you something...” Hero Gold-Hair began, folding his arms as he glanced over at Phufun. “The demon magic beasts and that silver-haired girl all seemed like they couldn’t stand my Drilldozer Shovel. You have any idea why that is?” He took the Drilldozer Shovel out of the Bottomless Bag he wore on his belt and gave the item a searching look. “If we understood that, maybe we could use it to fight those magic beasts.”

“You make a good point,” said Phufun, adjusting her glasses again. “Very well. I will return to the Dark Citadel for the time being and see if I can learn anything from the others involved in the investigation.” Without missing a beat, she spread her succubus wings wide and leapt from the quickly moving carriage, taking to the sky.

Hero Gold-Hair watched her fly away, and then turned his attention back to the others in the carriage. “Valentine still needs time to recover on our end. So until we hear back from Phufun, let’s just keep an eye on them from a safe distance.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Valentine asked with a smile, holding out her hands. “I’m fully recovered, I assure you!”

“You said it yourself, didn’t you?” said Hero Gold-Hair. “You need lots of rest to recover that magic of yours! You’re part of the team, you know, so don’t push yourself past your limits!” He grabbed Valentine and forced her to lie down, resting her head on his lap in the carriage seat.

“H-Hero Gold-Hair...?” Valentine said, her cheeks blushing red. “Th-This is a little...embarrassing...”

Hero Gold-Hair patted the djinn on her head. “Look,” he said, looking intently into her eyes. “We’re all going to die someday. But you aren’t allowed to go off and push up daisies before I do! Got it?!” He flicked her once on the forehead before giving her a few more comforting pats.

At first, Valentine didn’t seem to know what to make of Hero Gold-Hair’s behavior. But after a moment, her expression resolved into a happy smile. “Yes, sir...” she said, closing her eyes and allowing herself to drift off in Hero Gold-Hair’s lap.

Tsuya, Riliangiu, and Wuha Gappoli gazed enviously at the scene playing out in front of them.

“Hero Gooold-Hair is sooo considerate towards aaall of us...” Tsuya gushed.

“My loyalty towards him grows ever deeper,” agreed Riliangiu.

“Still... I wish I could trade places with Lady Valentine right about now...” griped Wuha Gappoli.

Suddenly, Aryun Keats’s telepathic voice rang out through the carriage. *“I apologize profusely for the interruption, but it seems the enemy is in pursuit.”*

“So they’ve shown up after all, have they?” Hero Gold-Hair stuck his head out the window as the rest of the party followed suit behind him. “The same magic beasts as last time?”

“Looooks that way...” remarked Tsuya. “The puuurple and the bluuue and the reeed!”

Hero Gold-Hair nodded, keeping his frustrations to himself. *I don’t want to push Valentine further... Which means the only ones who can fight right now are me and Riliangiu. What to do...?*

As he was deliberating, however, Demmie opened the door on the carriage’s opposite side wide. She was dressed in the clothing her retainers had prepared for her. “Mister Hero Gold-Hair!” she called out. “You make sure to escape! House Ulgo will hold off the magic beasts!” And with that, she jumped from the moving carriage, Genbushein, Rozen Laurel, and Rosalina following along behind.

“You’re a decent fellow, Hero Gold-Hair!” said Genbushein. “Keep looking out for those ladies, you hear?”

“I guess we were wrong about you,” said Rozen Laurel. “Next time we meet, I’m gonna hug you so hard you’ll feel like your spine’s about to snap!”

“Now, allow us to show you what we can do!” proclaimed Rosalina.

The three magic beasts were running after the speeding carriage when their way was abruptly blocked by the remnants of House Ulgo. “House Ulgo never forgets a kindness—or a grudge!” shouted Demmie, spinning her scythe dramatically as she charged the monstrosities. “Those are our two absolute rules!”

“You got the better of us last time! Don’t think we won’t pay you back!” Genbushein ascended from behind Demmie, increasing his arms to an enormous size and striking the purple beast with his heavy fists. The demon magic beast staggered from the blow and collapsed. “Regretfully, we had to be saved by Hero Gold-Hair. But we *will* repay our debt!”

The red magic beast tried to slip through in the melee to pursue the carriage, only to find its way barred by Rozen Laurel. “And we’ll pay back the shame of having our lady captured—with interest!” she declared, locking arms with the magic beast and keeping it pinned to the spot.

The blue magic beast jumped up on the red beast’s shoulders as it grappled with the golem, bounding after the carriage. It seemed poised to clear the distance and catch up with Hero Gold-Hair’s party when Rosalina appeared, floating in midair like a tuft of cotton caught by the breeze, her sword flashing valiantly. “House Ulgo may be reduced to four members, but each of us is a warrior worth a thousand men!” The blue magic beast was sent flying by her sword strike, back to where Demmie was waiting, her scythe at the ready in a high guard. Spinning it in an elegant dance, she slashed at the beast’s head, scoring a direct hit.

The magic beast collapsed to the ground, unconscious. Its body grew smaller and smaller, eventually transforming into a blue-haired young girl. “That girl...” Demmie started. “She’s the girl from back in that room, isn’t she?”

Demmie covered the naked girl with her cape, and turned to face the others.

“Which of you is next?” she snarled, holding her scythe high. “I won’t let you pass!”

◇Later Still◇

As Aryun Keats sped along, Hero Gold-Hair sat with his arms folded, deep in thought, Valentine fast asleep with her head in his lap. She had put on a brave front, but it was obvious that she needed time to recover.

Suddenly, Hero Gold-Hair’s thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone knocking on the door of the still-moving carriage. Riliangiu, who was sitting near the window, poked her head out to see Phufun flying alongside them. “Lady Phufun?” she gawked, quickly opening the door to let the succubus into the carriage.

Hero Gold-Hair leaned over, careful not to disturb Valentine’s rest. “Phufun! That was fast! Did you learn something?”

“I did,” Phufun said, pressing her glasses up the ridge of her nose. “Lord Zanzibar gave me a very interesting bit of information...” She took out a sheet of paper and handed it to Hero Gold-Hair. It was an image—a relief taken from some ancient artifact. “This is one of the relics of Lilia, the Dark Divinity allegedly worshipped by Auncor, whom we met earlier. The inscription reads as follows: *‘And so the rampage of the fused beasts, descendants of Lilia, came to an end. Their souls were sealed deep underground, with the aid of the legendary item, the Drilldozer Shovel...’*” She adjusted her glasses. “The forbidden spell they use to fuse demons with magic beasts comes from the Dark Divinity Lilia herself, and it is known as Xenofusion. But only someone of Lilia’s bloodline can use her magic. In which case, we can guess at the identity of the girl with silver hair...”

Hero Gold-Hair nodded. “I see... So if this inscription is to be believed, those magic beasts and the girl who uses fusion magic have good reason to be cautious of this shovel of mine...”

Just then, the carriage began to rock violently. “Keats!” Hero Gold-Hair barked. “What’s wrong?!”

“It’s them! One of them stuck themselves to me at some point when I wasn’t looking!”

“Them?” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “But that House Ulgo bunch stopped the three magic beasts, didn’t they?”

“No! It wasn’t just three! There was another in that room...!”

“Dablys...” Hero Gold-Hair said. “The girl with silver hair, who uses fusion magic!” No sooner had the words left his mouth than the roof of the carriage was torn open to reveal Dablys herself peering straight at him from above.

“I’ve finally caught up with you, O master of the Drilldozer Shovel...” she growled, her body transforming into a beast before their eyes.

Hero Gold-Hair’s eyes fixed on the item she was holding in her hands—Demmie’s scythe. “What did you do with House Ulgo, you scummy magician?!” he demanded. Dablys, however, gave no answer. Fully transformed into a silver magic beast, she merely howled as she brought the scythe to bear against Hero Gold-Hair.

“Not on my watch!” Aryun Keats cried as the carriage roof split apart right where Dablys was standing, sending the silver monster and the roof itself tumbling behind them. Now roofless, Aryun sped along at top speed as Riliangiu cast a wide-area Scan spell to keep an eye on their surroundings.

“This is bad,” she said. “The demon magic beasts are surrounding us and closing in. Three in total.”

Hero Gold-Hair furrowed his brow. “If our old friend Dablys from earlier counts as one, that means House Ulgo managed to take out one of them...” *You idiots had better be all right...* he thought as he took out the Drilldozer Shovel. “Well, we have our information. Time for a counterattack! First we capture the magic beasts attacking us, and then we go assist House Ulgo!”

“Yes, sir!” replied everyone in the carriage.

“They’re coming!” Aryun telepathically screamed in extreme distress.

Hero Gold-Hair took to his feet, shovel in hand. “Tsuya! Wuha! The two of you look after Valentine!”

“I’ll do what I can,” Wuha said, smirking sardonically and shrugging her shoulders. “But didn’t you know? I’m the weakest djinn you’ll ever meet! Aside

from my ability to turn into a mansion, I'm even weaker than your average human! Still...I'll do my best, since you're asking and all."

"Don't woorry, Lady Gappooli!" said Tsuya. "I'll be there to heeelp!" She flexed her slender arms to no effect whatsoever.

"Don't get yourselves hurt," said Hero Gold-Hair, glancing at the two of them. "I'm counting on you." He climbed up the side of the carriage and stood tall, surveying the land.

Without warning, two demon magic beasts—the purple one and the red one—jumped out in front of their path, coming at them in a pincer attack from the left and right.

"Ngh?!" Hero Gold-Hair swung the Drilldozer Shovel at the purple beast, leaving an opening for the red one to take a swing at his unprotected right flank. But Phufun leapt into the air, interposing herself between Hero Gold-Hair and the beast and spreading her arms wide, casting Magic Shield.

"Think again!" she yelled as the beast's claws rent at her shield with a sickening scrape, standing strong against the assault.

"Hya!" With a shout, Riliangiu seized the opportunity to deliver a string of agile attacks, her arms transformed into blades from the elbows down. The beast bent over backwards to avoid the flurry of blows, dodging by a hair's breadth.

A split second later, while the beast was still on the back leg, Tsuya leaned out of the carriage, taking a large wooden box out of her Bottomless Bag. With a mighty, "Taaake that!" she hurled it at the demon magic beast, taking the creature completely by surprise and somehow managing to knock it off its feet.

"This is our chance!" Phufun beat her succubus wings, flying through the air to deliver a devastating kick to the red beast while it was still prone.

"*Grwaaooooooooow!*" the beast cried, reeling backwards from the force of the direct hit.

Phufun landed with a flourish and adjusted her glasses. "They return to their demonic forms when they lose consciousness, so please try to knock them out if you can."

The red magic beast, however, still had some fight in it. It leapt back, landing vertically on a nearby tree, and used the tree as a platform to launch itself at Hero Gold-Hair, who was still busy fending off the purple beast.

“Off the carriage!” said Hero Gold-Hair, leaping down himself, followed by Riliangiu. “No fighting inside Keats! Keats, you head north! Just a bit farther and you’ll be outside Klyrode territory!”

“*Understood!*” Aryun Keats sped off to the north through the woods, leaving Phufun, Riliangiu, and Hero Gold-Hair behind. The demon magic beasts let the carriage go and moved instead to surround Hero Gold-Hair.

Drat and damnation! Hero Gold-Hair thought as he brandished the Drilldozer Shovel at the beasts, turning between them to try and keep them both at bay. *I need to find an opening to dig a hole!*

“Hero Gold-Hair!” Riliangiu shouted. “Behind you!”

Hero Gold-Hair dove forward just in time to avoid Dablys’s claws. She struck at the spot where he had been only a second ago, gouging out the forest earth with the force of her attack. If he had been even a moment later, those claws would have found his flesh.

“Hero Gold-Hair, are you hurt?!” Asked Riliangiu.

“I’m fine!” Hero Gold-Hair sprung up to his feet. “Thanks for watching my back, Riliangiu!” Riliangiu stood beside him, keeping her arm-blades trained on the demon magic beasts.

Dablys raised her head to look at Hero Gold-Hair, not bothering to pull her claws out of the ground. “What a pity...” she muttered. “You should have let me kill you there. It would have been a much less miserable death.” She sneered wickedly as a horde of the white, winged magic beasts sprouted from her back, mobbing Hero Gold-Hair from all directions.

Between Dablys in her beast form, the red and purple demon magic beasts, and now the seemingly endless swarm of white magic beasts, Hero Gold-Hair, Riliangiu, and Phufun soon found themselves overwhelmed. They were forced back-to-back-to-back, unable to move.

No! Hero Gold-Hair despaired, beads of fearful sweat running down his brow.

The white beasts figured out my pit trap plan! They're staying in the sky!



As Hero Gold-Hair fought for his life, Aryun Keats raced through the forest as fast as her wheels could carry her.

“Aryuuuuuun!” whined Valentine, who had since woken up. “Turn back around this instant!” She kicked and kicked at the carriage floor, but as weakened as she was, she could hardly put any power behind the strikes. The kicks were only making her feel light-headed from the exertion.

“There’s no point, Val,” said Wuha Gappoli as she tried to coax the former Evil General into lying back down in the carriage seat. “You still need time to recover! If you go like this, you’ll only get in Hero Gold-Hair’s way.”

Valentine, however, shook her head violently. “No, no, no, no, no!” she shouted. “Couldn’t you tell how powerful those magic beasts were? Especially that Dablys woman! Hero Gold-Hair’s in danger! I have to help him! Oh... If I were at full strength, I could handle them easily...” She tried to stand, but Tsuya and Wuha held her tight from either side, keeping her in place. “Lady Tsuya! Wuha! Let me go!” Valentine protested, desperately trying to wrench her arm from Wuha’s grip.

“Nooo!” cried Tsuya. “You caaan’t! In yooour state you’ll just get huuurt! Seeee? You can’t even handle me and Lady Gappooli!”

Tsuya’s argument seemed to finally convince her. Valentine crumpled back in her seat, thoroughly miserable. “Please...” she prayed, casting her eyes up to the heavens. “Someone, anyone, help Hero Gold-Hair in my stead!”

Suddenly, as if in answer to her prayers, she noticed a large masculine figure peering down at her from overhead. “Well, what’s this about?” the man asked. “I got a report saying there was a disturbance in the forest near the human border, and who should I find but...”

Valentine’s face broke out into a huge smile when she realized who it was. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “*That’s* why Hero Gold-Hair told us to head north!”



Dablys's attack struck Hero Gold-Hair in the leg, knocking him to the ground.

"Geh!" he yelped, wincing in pain.

"Hero Gold-Hair!" cried Phufun, who was busy fighting the red demon magic beast a short distance away. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine!" Hero Gold-Hair insisted, holding the Drilldozer Shovel out in front of him as he took to his feet once more. "Focus on your own fight!"

The white beasts drew back as if they were afraid of the shovel, only to divide their ranks and attack Hero Gold-Hair from his left and right flanks. Worse, Dablys and the purple beast were inching closer, carefully avoiding the Drilldozer Shovel. Riliangiu and Phufun had their hands full defending against the white beasts' attacks, leaving them in no position to come to his aid.

Hero Gold-Hair adjusted his grip on the shovel, his shoulders heaving with the effort of catching his breath. The magic beasts took to the sky whenever he tried to dig, rendering his strongest weapon ineffective. And if he wasn't careful about where he dug, he might get in Phufun or Valentine's way instead. All in all, he had found himself thoroughly stymied by these monsters.

They'll kill us all at this rate... Hero Gold-Hair thought. I should see if I can create an opening for Phufun and Riliangiu to get away... A smile crossed his face. It's funny. Back when I had all those knights working for me I wouldn't have thought anything of sacrificing my subordinates to get away. I guess I've changed a bit after all...

"Smiling when things look darkest, hmm?" mocked Dablys as she inched her way closer in her magic beast form. "Well, I suppose you fought quite hard, for an unmodified human. I must say, I'm impressed." She held out a hand, a triumphant grin on her monstrous face. "Don't worry, we'll use all of you as materials for fusion. If it goes well, you and I will be comrades!"

Hero Gold-Hair met her gaze. "Sorry," he said, his smile not faltering for a second as he got back on guard. "But I've got plans. I don't have time to join your club!"

Just then, an enormous man fell from the sky, forcefully landing right between Hero Gold-Hair and Dablys, shaking the earth. "You've got plans?" he

said. "That's a damn shame. I was thinking of inviting you for drinks after this!"

Hero Gold-Hair's brave facade burst into a genuine grin. "Don't be ridiculous! When have I ever turned down an invitation from you, Dawkson?"

"Valentine told me the gist of what's going on," Dawkson said, stretching his shoulders as he readied himself for a fight. "Ready to kick some ass?"

"Th-The Dark One himself?!" Dablys exclaimed, reeling despite herself at the sudden appearance of the ruler of demonkind on the battlefield. "B-But what about your peace treaty with the humans?!"

"What about it?" Dawkson shot back. "I mean, we're close to the border, sure, but this is demon land."

Suddenly, Dablys realized her error. "I see... We crossed the border while we were chasing after them..."

With the Dark One on the field, the situation was completely different. "Taaaake...that!" Dawkson bellowed, swinging his arm and sending a whole group of the white magic beasts flying into the distance. They tried to overwhelm him with their numbers, but Dawkson simply swatted them away like bothersome insects.

Dablys clicked her tongue at the sight. "What a pickle... We have a good stock of the mass-produced models, but they're no use at all against *him*. I guess we're at an impasse." She locked eyes with Hero Gold-Hair, who was taking advantage of Dawkson's cover to catch his breath. "Aim for that one! If we can kill the holder of the legendary Drilldozer Shovel, we will eliminate the greatest threat to the Dark Divinity Lilia!"

The purple and blue magic beasts, as well as the surviving white ones, changed their targets immediately, leaping directly for Hero Gold-Hair as Dablys herself scuttled forward, her body low to the ground. The mass-produced white beasts were close behind, ready to mob him with their numbers.

"Damned nuisance..." Hero Gold-Hair muttered. "You think you got the better of Hero Gold-Hair? Think again!" Surrounded, he took the Drilldozer Shovel and stuck the earth, digging with furious speed.

"Digging more holes?" Dablys taunted him as she leapt into the air. "Is that

your only trick? Well, we know how to deal with *that!*” Suddenly, however, Hero Gold-Hair flung a lump of earth into the sky, striking Dablys directly in midair. “A-Ahhh?!” she cried, caught off guard by the attack. She plummeted to the ground. The purple, red, and white beasts caught clumps of dirt and rock to the face as well. One by one, they fell from the sky.

Phufun seized the opportunity and leapt for the red magic beast. “That’s enough of that!” she shouted, striking it on the top of its head with a powerful axe kick, bringing her heel down hard.

“Groaaaaaar!” the beast cried as it collapsed, unconscious.

“How dreadful...” Dablys shivered. “I’m absolutely covered in dirt!” She stood up, wiping the filth from her face. When she opened her eyes, she saw the Dark One Dawkson, who was still busy smashing up the magic beasts. His back was turned. “This is all your fault... If only you hadn’t come here and ruined our harmony!” She leapt at him, sharp claws at the ready, but...

“Not happening!” Hero Gold-Hair flung the Drilldozer Shovel itself this time, aiming right for Dablys.

“You again?!” Dablys contorted her body in midair, narrowly dodging. The movement, however, cost her enough balance that she wasn’t able to properly launch an attack.

Hero Gold-Hair, though, had disarmed himself. The purple beast wasted no time in launching an attack. “Gh!” Hero Gold-Hair exclaimed, doing his best to dodge, but the monstrosity was on him before he could even move. It stabbed its claw into his shoulder.

“B-Blondie!” Dawkson panicked and tried to get over to Hero Gold-Hair, but the white beasts kept attacking one after another. “You dumb pests! Get outta my way!” he cried, battering them out of the sky. The gap in power between the Dark One and the mass-produced beasts was evident, but no matter how many he struck down, more took their place. They weren’t able to hurt him, but they had effectively locked him down, along with Phufun and Riliangiu.

Hero Gold-Hair glared at the purple beast and grabbed hold of the claw stuck in his shoulder. “Damn nuisance!” he cried, kicking the creature in the midsection as hard as he could.

The beast, however, didn't even flinch. Fresh blood was flowing from Hero Gold-Hair's wound as his face twisted in pain.

Suddenly, an explosion rang out. *"Kaboom!"* Something blasted the purple beast from the opposite side, sending it flying and ripping its claw out of Hero Gold-Hair's shoulder, trailing blood.

Aryun Keats had come to the rescue. She had turned around and raced here as fast as she was able. Now she stood in the forest, in her Magitank form. *"You won't lay a finger on Sir Hero Gold-Hair!"* she declared, releasing a volley of blasts in the beast's direction. *"Not as long as Aryun Keats is here!"*

The hatch on top of the tank opened, and Tsuya, Wuha Gappoli, and Valentine came rushing out.

"H-Hero Gooold-Hair! Are you all riiight?" asked Tsuya, quickly taking a roll of bandages from the Bottomless Bag and rushing to patch up Hero Gold-Hair's shoulder. She was in a terrible rush, though, and did a sloppy job, wrapping the bandages all the way around his whole upper body.

"T-Tsuya!" Hero Gold-Hair told her. "Calm down!"

"Awawah?! I-I'm soooorry! I'm tryyying!" Flustered out of her mind, Tsuya tried to pull her hands away. Somehow, however, she only ended up getting Hero Gold-Hair even more tangled, and he began to resemble some sort of mummy.

Aryun Keats kept firing shot after shot, protecting Hero Gold-Hair from any beasts sneaking up behind. Valentine weaved her threads, ensnaring the white beasts. Wuha Gappoli, meanwhile, could do nothing but hide behind Aryun, cheering on the rest of the party.

Even with Keats and the rest here, there's just too many of them! Hero Gold-Hair thought. *There must be a way to save everyone...but what do I do?!* He stood up, still wrapped in Tsuya's bandages, when suddenly, he heard a voice in his mind.

"Hero Gold-Hair..."

"Hm?! Who's that?!"

"It's me! Your partner!"

“My partner?”

“That’s right,” the voice said. “You want to save your friends, don’t you? Then, fuse with me...”

“Wh-What was that?! Fuse?!” Hero Gold-Hair looked all around in a panic, before suddenly his eyes settled on something glittering with golden light by a forest cliff—the Drilldozer Shovel he had thrown to save Dawson, lying on the ground. “I see... So it’s you. My partner...”

Hero Gold-Hair held out his arm and the Drilldozer Shovel responded, flying through the air, to reunite with its owner. When he caught it, his body began to glow as well. There was a flash...

And standing there, cape fluttering in the breeze, stood a giant shovel, its head firmly planted in the ground.

“Huh?” said Valentine.

“Huuuh?!” said Tsuya.

“Excuse me?!” demanded Wuha Gappoli.

“What just happened?!” asked Aryun Keats.

Hero Gold-Hair’s party stared, mouths agape at the sight. The magic beasts, however, reeled back from the glowing shovel. Dablys glared daggers in its direction, creasing her monstrous brow. “I have to stop him...” she uttered. “Before he unleashes the true power of the Drilldozer Shovel, the power that sealed away the Dark Divinity Lilia!”

“H-Hey...” came a telepathic voice from inside the shovel. The assembled parties all stopped to listen. *“Drilldozer Shovel? Partner?”*

“Yes?” said another voice in reply. *“Is there something you need?”*

“This form’s all well and good...” said the first voice. *“But how exactly are we supposed to attack them?”*

Silence.

“Partner?”

There was no answer.

“H-Hang on! You can’t just leave me hanging without explaining how to operate this thing! Hey!”

A smirk crossed Dablys’s face. “Wonderful!” she said joyously. “Just listen to those notes of despair! Now we can be rid of you miscreants who keep ruining my harmony, and perform a song of jubilation!” Extending her claws, she raced forward towards the shovel—but she wasn’t the only one.

“So, you’re telling me I just gotta use you to attack, huh!” With the white beasts busy fleeing from the sight of the shovel, Dawkson finally had his hands free. He ran for the shovel, transforming into his full demonic form as he moved.

“Don’t interfere!” hissed Dablys. “The likes of you are nothing but noise!”

“Shaddap!” Dawkson shouted, grabbing Hero Gold-Hair by the handle moments before Dablys closed the distance. “I can’t *stand* music! It pisses me off!”

Dablys made a desperate leap at Dawkson, trying to attack him from above as the red and purple beasts followed from behind, soaring through the air.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Dawkson bellowed. “Let’s go, brother!”

“You’ve got this, Dawkson!” answered Hero Gold-Hair’s telepathic voice.

Thwack! The shovel struck Dablys solidly across her entire body, sending her flying. “Riliangiu! Phufun! Get down!” ordered Dawkson as he swung Hero Gold-Hair side to side. The two ducked down just in time to avoid getting clipped by the red and purple magic beasts as Dawkson knocked them spiraling back through the air as well.

As they flew, the demon magic beast fusion came undone. The magic beasts and demon children landed separately, falling into an unceremonious heap in the dirt.

Dablys watched in disbelief, sprawled out on the ground herself. “Undoing the Dark Divinity’s Fusion magic...” she muttered. “Drilldozer Shovel... So you would ruin us once again...” She had been glowing with light ever since being struck by the accursed shovel, and the outlines of her form were growing indistinct. She closed her eyes, and her body vanished without a trace.

Without Dablys giving them instructions, the remaining white magic beasts began hesitantly glancing around at their surroundings. Dawkson, however, had no intention of showing them mercy. “Take that! And that! And that! I’m not letting any of you get away!”

Soon, there was nothing left of the loathsome magic beasts.



◇Meanwhile—Creatrix Auncor's Laboratory◇

"It's over..." Auncor sighed as she watched the battle through a crystal from her underground emergency shelter. "The demon magic beasts... The mass-produced magic beasts... Dablys, who could use the Dark Divinity's Fusion magic... They're all gone..."

"How dreadful..." Vintermann agreed. "Now we have nothing to deliver to the Shadow Conglomerate!" The two of them exchanged a worried glance, cold sweat starting to form on their respective brows.

"I don't relish the idea of being in debt to them..." said Auncor.

"Indeed. And we've already used the money they gave us. I can't imagine those two from the Conglomerate will simply look the other way..."

"If we run now..." Auncor hesitated. "We could still get away..."

"Indeed," agreed Vintermann. "That may be our best hope for making it out alive..."

The two stood up and turned towards the exit, only to see two women already standing in the doorway—the one with the oversized abacus and the one who never seemed to stop her strange, twisting dance, both dressed in the same matching black gothic lolita style outfits. They regarded Auncor and Vintermann with icy glares.

"My, my, my," said the woman with the abacus. "Running away because you can't fulfill your contract? I hope you don't expect the Shadow Conglomerate's one and only Lady Shanderena to take such behavior lightly."

"Naughty, naughty!" the dancing woman sang. "Lady Yanderena might just have to punish you!"

As the two drew near, Auncor and Vintermann clung to each other tight, shaking and trembling with fear. "N-No!" Auncor protested. "W-We weren't trying to run!"

"Th-There are still some of the mass-produced models left!" pleaded Vintermann. "Perhaps there's something we can—"

"Not nearly enough, I'm afraid," said Shanderena, hefting her abacus. "I find

you guilty...of failing to uphold your contract.”

“Torture! Torture! Torture!” Yanderena cackled as she twirled. “It’s been so long! I can’t wait!”

◇The Following Morning◇

In a forest, on the bank of a gentle stream, Wuha Gappoli sat transformed into a mansion. Inside, Hero Gold-Hair’s party was gathered in the living room.

“Phufun’s people looked it over, but those bastards picked the laboratory clean...” Dawkson grumbled. He was sitting on the sofa, relaying the news with evident irritation. “They found a hidden underground room, but that one was empty too...”

“Still,” said Hero Gold-Hair, “we were able to save the children who’d been kidnapped! I’d say that’s a job well done if you ask me.”

“Yeah.” Dawkson nodded. “True enough...” After a moment of thought, he turned to look at Hero Gold-Hair. “By the way, brother...”

“Yes?” Hero Gold-Hair asked.

“So...how long are you gonna be in that form?”

“Well, that is the question, isn’t it...?” remarked Hero Gold-Hair, who was still stuck as an oversized shovel. Right now Tsuya was carrying him around, since he couldn’t move under his own locomotion. “I’m afraid I don’t know myself...”

“You don’t know...”

“Not a clue.” Hero Gold-Hair’s voice sounded genuinely worried. “I keep bugging the Drilldozer Shovel, but it hasn’t been responding at all! Without its help, I have no idea how I’m supposed to turn back into my original form...”

“I even tried using some spells I know from the Realm of Evil...” Valentine sighed, slumping her shoulders in defeat. “None of them were any use...”

“Don’t woorry!” said Tsuya, holding the shovel tight and sandwiching the shovel head between her hefty breasts. “Until you’re back to nooormal, I’ll take goood care of you!”

“M...Mhh...” Hero Gold-Hair grunted stiffly, doing his best to ignore the

sensation.

“Hmm?” Tsuya asked innocently. “Hero Gooold-Hair? What’s wrooong?”

Hero Gold-Hair and his band of misfits had survived the ordeal more or less intact, and everyone was in good spirits as they began another day.

Chapter 4: Rys, the Goddess?

◇Several Days Later—Flio's House◇

One day, Flio was in the workshop behind his house—not the building itself, but the vast underground workspace he had hollowed out beneath. Rys, who had just stepped down from the stairs, tilted her head curiously as she peered at the mysterious objects lying on the ground, which were wrapped in a white thread. “My lord husband, what are those?”

“Oh, those?” answered Flio. “Greanyl’s team found them when they were out making deliveries around the border between the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the demons’ territory. They seem to be the corpses of some sort of magic beast. Someone must have killed them recently. See? They’re still leaking magic energy out from their mouths...” He stepped over and placed his hand on one of the white magic beasts’ mouths to check, when suddenly, a window appeared in front of him.

Mastered All Spells from Dark Divinity Lilia’s Magic.

“Dark Divinity Lilia’s magic?” Flio read, cocking his head in confusion.

Flio had a skill that enabled him to instantly master any magic he didn’t already know simply by touching a spell once. These white creatures had been created by the Dark Divinity’s Fusion spell, after all, and touching the magic energy seeping out from their corpses had been enough to cause his skill to activate, giving him access to Lilia’s fusion spells on top of everything else.

“Did you say Dark Divinity Lilia?” Rys asked.

“That’s right...” said Flio. “I guess that’s the kind of magic that created these things. Do you know anything about this Dark Divinity, Rys?”

“Not really...” Rys admitted, folding her arms and mulling it over in her head. “I feel like I’ve seen that name before, though. In a book in the Dark Citadel’s

archives, maybe...”

“Well, tell me if you remember anything, okay?” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile.

“I will,” said Rys. “But my lord husband, what do you intend to use these creatures for?”

“Oh, I just wanted to see if I could use them as components to make some kind of new magic item. Like I said, there’s still some magic left in their corpses. Right now I’m just trying things out.”

“I see,” said Rys. “I was wondering if you were perhaps going to use them as feed for the magic horses.”

“Anyway,” Flio said, turning away from the husks to face his wife, “Rys, was there something you wanted?”

“Well...yes...” Rys said, suddenly looking nervous. She fidgeted a bit before timidly opening her mouth again. “My lord husband...about that cloth...”

“You mean the cloth we bought from Esto, the merchant from Indol?”

“Yes, that one... I’m afraid we’ve run out...”

“Huh...?” Flio asked, freezing up for a second before realizing that Rys was staring at him. He cleared his throat. “Rys...” he said. “We bought out that entire wagon, didn’t we? And it wasn’t a small one either. You’ve really used *all* of it?”

“Yes...” Rys uttered, touching a finger to her lips and lowering her gaze. “I got so wrapped up in making clothes for the house’s newest children, Rylnàsze, Rabbitz, and Belalio. And then I ended up making clothes for Elinàsze and Garyl, and Rislei and Folmina and Ghoros too, and before I knew it, I was completely out...”

“I-I don’t suppose you could use the cloth from Silkfleece in Osahka, could you?” suggested Flio.

“Well, I *could*...” Rys admitted. “But the children are really quite taken with that cloth. I’d like to get them more of the same sort, if possible...” She looked nervously up at Flio, begging with her eyes like a needy puppy. One look at her

expression, and Flio felt like he had been pierced through the heart.

“W-Well...” Flio started, crossing his arms. “Esto did say he would be paying a visit to Houghtow City on his next trip, but that won’t be for another two months... But I can’t teleport to Indol since I’ve never been there before, and I’m afraid my hands are a bit full at the moment...”

“My lord husband...” began Rys, gently grabbing hold of one of his arms. “Might I have permission to travel to Indol and back with Wyne? She says she’s been to Indol before, and in her wyvern form she could make the trip in a single go...” She squeezed Flio’s arm tight, pressing it to her chest in the process.

Flio’s cheeks went red. “W-Well, all right. Just take care, would you?”

“Of course! Thank you so much, my lord husband!” Rys flushed as well, her nervous expression lighting up instantly. “Now then, I’ll get ready to set out at once!”

“Right this instant?”

“Yes! Right this instant!” Then, Rys ran off to her room to get a start on packing. There was no stopping her when she made up her mind to do something, after all.

Flio watched her go with a slightly lonesome smile on his face. *If she was willing to go tomorrow or the day after, I could have worked extra hard to get all this done so I could go with her...* he thought as he called up a window displaying his busy itinerary. *But alas...*

◇Later—Near Flio’s House◇

A wyvern with brilliant red scales touched down in an empty field nearby Flio’s house—Wyne, in her full draconic glory. It was a regular weekday, so most of the house was out for either school or work. The only three who showed up to see Wyne and Rys off were Flio, Blossom, and Byleri.

“I looked over my schedule, and there is really just no way for me to go with you today,” remarked Flio. He didn’t apologize, exactly, but it was clear from his face that he was disappointed not to be coming along.

Rys, however, smiled brightly and wrapped her arms tight around her

husband. “I’ll be back in time for dinner,” she cooed. “In the meanwhile, I leave the house in your capable hands.” And with a soft kiss on Flio’s cheek and a “Well then, I’d best be off,” Rys climbed up on Wyne’s lowered head and got ready to fly.

“Oh,” said Flio, calling for them to stop. “Hang on just a second...”

“What is it, my lord husband?”

“I managed something interesting with those white magic beast carcasses...” he said, pulling one of the white magic beasts that had been in the workshop basement out of his Bottomless Bag. Its corpse was sealed inside a magic orb.

Flio held the orb in his left hand and touched it with his right as he began casting a spell. A magic circle appeared around the orb and seemed to fuse with it, binding together in a complicated arrangement of arcane elements. Before long, the mass took form, uncannily resembling a young Flio.

“Incredible!” said Rys. “I suppose that would be a magic doll, then?”

“No, actually,” said Flio. “His structure is closer to a magic beast. A magic doll doesn’t generally change after it’s produced. But this *magic beast doll*, let’s call it, has the ability to return to its original component materials, or even transform into other types of magic beasts...”

“Goodness!” gasped Rys. “I suppose that means there’s less need to worry about what you’re going to do with them...” Flio had long been able to create magic dolls, but since a magic doll lacked the ability to simply return to its original form, it wasn’t something that he did lightly.

“That’s the hope. I made this one using Fusion—one of those Dark Divinity Lilia spells I learned just a bit ago. I thought I’d send him along with you in my stead.”

“I see!” said Rys, patting the magic beast doll’s politely smiling head. “That *will* make me feel a bit less lonely, I suppose.”

“I’ll be here too, Mama!” Wyne said, rubbing her own massive dragon head against Rys. “So you won’t be lonely-lonely!” She shook her head for emphasis. Rys, however, was holding on to Wyne’s scales, and the gesture caused the skirt of her dress to ride up her legs...

“W-Wait!” Rys said, pushing her skirt down as best she could and blushing furiously. “Wyne, wait! My lord husband, might I ask you to look away for a moment?!”

Flio dutifully obliged, covering his face with both hands and turning to look the other direction. Next to him, the magic beast doll followed suit.

Blossom and Byleri, meanwhile, ran over. “Hey, Wyne!” said Blossom pounding on Wyne’s head with her fists. “Cut it out, will ya?!”

“Like, what she said!” added Byleri. “Cool it a bit, ’kay?”

Nothing, however, could deter Wyne from nuzzling her face against Rys’s cheeks.



Eventually, Wyne calmed down, and Rys settled in properly for her flight. She waved Flio goodbye, the magic beast doll he had given her held tight in her lap. The doll copied her movements, waving alongside her.

“Thank you for Chibilio, my lord husband!” she said, nuzzling the doll affectionately. She had given him the name Chibilio herself. “Now I’ll be able to dote on him while I’m away, and think of you!”

Flio waved back at Rys, Wyne, and Chibilio with his usual easygoing smile on his face. “Take care, everyone. Wyne, Chibilio, I’m counting on you two to look after Rys, okay?”

Chibilio and Wyne both nodded their assent.

“Well then,” Rys declared. “We’re off!” At that signal, Wyne spread her great wings wide and beat them powerfully. In no time at all, the enormous wyvern was high in the sky, flying off towards the west.

“Whoa!” cried Blossom. “Wyne’s speed gets me every time!”

“Like, no kidding...” Byleri agreed. “It’s been, like, a second, and they’re already totally out of view!”

Flio, meanwhile, kept waving off to the west. It seemed like them being out of view wasn’t a problem *he* was having. “All right,” he said after a while. “I suppose I’ll do my best to get everything done as quickly as I can.” He turned

and headed back to the workshop.

As Flio walked, he focused his thoughts on Chibilio. As he did, he found he could see everything in the magic beast doll's vicinity through his mind's eye. *Everything's working well*, he thought. *Just like the instruction window for the Fusion spell said...* By synchronizing his consciousness with the magic beast doll, Flio was able to perceive the world through Chibilio's senses. *This way, if something goes wrong, I can head there immediately*. He smirked to himself. *Although, thinking back, Rys hardly ever needs the help, does she...?*

Suddenly, Flio felt a strange soft sensation on the back of his head. "H-Huh? What's that?" he wondered aloud, brushing the back of his head with his hand. There was, however, nothing to be found on Flio's head itself. The sensation had come from his synchronized senses—Rys's breasts pressing up against Chibilio's head.

◇Meanwhile—On Wyne's Back◇

Wyne coursed through the sky with incredible speed. On her back sat Rys, holding Chibilio in her lap with one hand and patting him on the head with the other.

"Now, now, Chibilio," Rys said. "You mustn't turn around in mid-flight!"

Chibilio, who had turned to glance at Rys's chest with an embarrassed smile on his face, turned his head back to look forward.

"Chibilio," Rys went on. "The man who created you—my lord husband—is a truly wonderful man. He loves me so dearly and always treats me with such care. Why, just the other day, he gave me the most beautiful magic gem! He said it would suit me perfectly as a hair accessory..."

As they flew over the land, Rys regaled Chibilio with story after story about her wonderful husband.

◇Still Meanwhile—Flio's Workshop◇

Flio's face was bright red as he reached the front door to his workshop. *Rys...* he thought. *It makes me very glad how much she thinks of me, but it's also just a little bit embarrassing...*

Flio had heard everything Rys was saying through his connection with Chibilio. He had been blushing and smiling bashfully the whole time he had been making his way to the workshop.

Let's get this done as soon as we can, and then go meet up with Rys!

◇Houghtow College of Magic◇

While Flio was seeing Rys off on her journey, Garyl, Elinàsze, and Rislei were finishing up their day at school. The bell rang, signaling the end of class, and the girls in the classroom all took to their feet at once, rushing out the door as quickly as they could. Each of them was holding a small rectangular object in their hands.

“I’d best be off!”

“Me too!”

“Hey! No head starts!”

Just the other day, Flio had begun selling miniaturized crystal photography devices, which he called Pictocapture Cameras. They were small enough to fit in the palm of a child’s hand. Before Flio began experimenting, magic items capable of recording images suffered from a number of limits. They had to be shaped like a hefty orb or else the magical energy wouldn’t be conducted properly. Flio, however, had been performing all sorts of research with the help of Hiya, Damalynas, and Maglion. He discovered a way to compress the waste matter produced when a magic gem undergoes refinement, and with this method managed to reduce the size to no bigger than a human thumb.

Flio set the resulting crystal in a box, with a view hole and a button on the front. It was a simple machine that enabled anyone to take pictures of their surroundings. Before long, he had developed a model for sale and begun mass production. Because they were made from magic gem waste byproduct, they were quite inexpensive as well—cheap enough for a child to afford. Soon, they had become the newest fad among the city’s youth.

Pictocapture Cameras in hand, the girls ran through the halls until they reached a particular classroom. They tossed the door open and burst inside, all crying, “Garyl! Take a picture with meeeee!” as they mobbed the boy at his

desk, which was the closest one to the window.

Garyl looked up at the mob of girls and held his index finger to his lips, indicating for them to keep the volume down. The girls closed their mouths tight immediately and looked to see a little girl mumbling in her sleep, clinging to Garyl's head. He seemed to be taking great care not to rouse the girl.

"So Folmina fell asleep after all..." said Elinàsze, walking up to her brother's desk.

"Uh-huh!" Garyl winced. "She drifted off partway through class and started snoring on my head."

Elinàsze couldn't help smirking wryly at the sight. "And after she was so excited to experience school... There's no point if she's just going to fall asleep!"

"Well, Folmina's still really little," said Garyl. "It is what it is."

"Oh! But Ghoró seems to be wide awake!" Elinàsze remarked, turning to look at the desk next to Garyl, where Ghoró was sitting quietly.

Garyl, however, smirked to himself as he glanced Ghoró's way. "He might be awake, but he's been staring at Folmina the whole entire time!"

"So...he hasn't been paying attention to the lesson?" Elinàsze asked.

At this point, Rislei, who was in the same class as the twins, walked up to join the conversation, smiling coyly. "Gho does love his sister Fol, though. It is what it is with her too, I guess."

"Fair enough!" said Garyl.

Ghoró, meanwhile, just kept staring at Folmina as she slept atop Garyl's head.

"By the way, Gar," said Rislei. "Are you all right? Can you see like that?" Folmina, after all, had managed to sleepily wrap her arms around Garyl's entire face.

"Hm? Oh, that's no problem! When it gets difficult to see in front of me, I can just do this with my hair!" He focused his power, and the two tufts of hair on his head that stuck up like a wolf's ears stood on end. Folmina, who was sandwiched between Garyl's hair tufts, was lifted up, clearing the obstruction from Garyl's face.

The girls didn't miss their chance. The moment they had a clear shot of Garyl's face without Folmina's hands in the way, they all began snapping pictures. Garyl gave them a forced smile.

"I was holding Folmina up like that during class..." he whispered to Rislei. "But I thought, during break, I could use her to shield me from the Pictocaptures..."

"I see..." Rislei whispered back. "I'm sorry for inconveniencing you."

Garyl relaxed his energy, letting his hair return to normal and lowering Folmina back down over his face. She reflexively moved her hands back to where they had been, hiding him from the cameras once more.

"Awwwwww!" cried the girls in open disappointment.

"I must say, I find these circumstances most objectionable!" Salina, Garyl's classmate, strolled up with folded arms, shooting Folmina a dirty glance as she clung to Garyl's face. *I understand wanting to spend every waking moment with Lord Garyl, she thought, but this girl is taking things too far, isn't she? And anyway, I'm jealous! I wish I could cling to Lord Garyl's head like that...* Suddenly, Salina found a black cat plush shoved in her face. "Mghf!"

Irystiel, a young girl wearing a black gothic lolita outfit, pulled the plush cat back by her own face, skillfully making it talk using ventriloquism. "Salina was making a creepy face! Mreow!" it said, its pink mouth opening and closing in time with the words.

Irystiel wasn't lying. Salina had indeed been staring at Garyl with a dreamy, slack-jawed, lovestruck expression as she imagined wrapping her arms around his head like Folmina. The words shocked Salina out of her stupor. She immediately closed her mouth and wiped the drool from her chin. "Wh-What would *you* know..." she huffed. "But more importantly, Folmina needs to sit properly at her desk! How else is Lord Garyl to receive his education in comfort?!"

Salina grabbed Folmina's waist with both hands and pulled for all she was worth, but Folmina, who had latched on to Garyl's head like an octopus, didn't move an inch. "Folmina! Get down from there!" Salina snapped. "Lord Garyl needs to pay attention to the lesson as well!"

“Zzz...” Folmina snored. “But I like it here...”

“Don’t be difficult!” Salina chided her. “Come now, hurry down!”

“Don’t wanna... Zzz...”

Salina pulled and pulled and pulled, but nothing she could do was enough to budge Folmina from Garyl’s head. The girls surrounding them watched with bated breath, waiting with their hands poised over the Pictocapture button for a clear shot of Garyl’s face. *You can do it, Salina!* they cheered to themselves, doing their best to send their support without actually saying a word. *And then we can finally get a good picture of Garyl!*

Rislei snickered at the sight of the girls waiting for an opportunity to take Garyl’s picture as her classmate, the lizardfolk Reptor, walked up, his tail swishing behind him. “Your house must be a lot, Rislei,” he said. “Aren’t there three new children too, on top of Ghoros and Folmina?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Rislei answered. “Ryl, Rabi, and Bela. They’re all very cute children.”

“Oh really...” Reptor replied. “Say, how about I come over to hang out sometime?”

“Huh?” Rislei blinked.

“A-Ah! I-I don’t mean anything weird by it! I’m just an only child, you know? I’ve always wanted to live in a big house with lots of other kids...”

“O-Oh!” Rislei sighed with relief. “So *that’s* what you meant. I thought you wanted to meet my papa and mama...”

“What was that?” Reptor asked.

“A-Aaah!” Rislei exclaimed, blushing to the tips of her ears and shaking her head furiously from side to side. “N-N-Never mind! It’s nothing! Nothing at all!”

Reptor, meanwhile, covered his face, equally embarrassed by Rislei’s words. Both children were awkwardly averting their eyes from each other.

Snow Little grinned as she watched Reptor and Rislei’s little drama play out from her seat nearby. “Goodness! I can feel the romantic comedy vibrations all the way over here! Perhaps I should do something to improve the mood...”

Snow Little was one of the fable folk, a tribe of demons with the ability to manifest powers from the fairy tales of many different worlds. One of her abilities let her conjure characters from stories as dolls. She spread her hands, and dolls representing seven dwarves appeared, each holding a musical instrument. They began to skip and twirl around Reptor and Rislei as they played their music.

“S-Snow...” Rislei protested. “You’re embarrassing us...”

“Y-Yeah!” agreed Reptor. “It’s way too soon for this!” He recognized the song the dwarves were playing—it was a melody used in wedding processions. Blushing a deep scarlet, he grabbed at the dolls with his hands and tail to try to stop them.

Snow Little, however, deftly manipulated her dolls, nimbly avoiding Reptor’s grasp. *Seeing Reptor woo Rislei reminds me of my sister, she thought. She’s tried so hard to win the Dark One’s heart...*

In her pursuit to wed Dawkson, Snow Little’s older sister, Snow White, had moved her entire family. She had sent Snow Little to study at the Houghtow College of Magic, which happened to be relatively close to her temporary house, until it was decided who the Dark One was to marry. Alas, however, she failed catastrophically in the cooking contest arranged for the Dark One’s hand. As such, she was now taking lessons at the local culinary school.

The bell rang again, signaling the start of the next class period. The students all brought their various conversations to a close and went back to their own desks or classrooms.

◇Some Time Later—Indol◇

Rys soared through the sky on Wyne’s back, holding the magic beast doll Chibilio tight in her lap. Before noon, they had reached the border of Indol.

“*That city with the big-big stone wall is Delulhi!*” Wyne told her.

“Delulhi is the capital of Indol, isn’t it?” said Rys. “Let’s not get too close, or else we’ll give the guards at the gate a terrible fright! We should walk the rest of the way.”

“Okey dokey, mama!” Wyne nodded her assent and flapped her wings,

skillfully canceling her forward momentum and diving to the ground. She landed in the desert, and lowered her neck.

Rys got down off Wyne's back, clutching Chibilio in her arms as she stepped onto the desert sands. "Now, shall we get walking?"

Wyne stretched her body like a cat, raising her tail and leaning back. She gradually grew smaller, until she had returned to her humanoid form. "Ahhhh!" she cried, still doing her stretches in the nude. "It's been forever since I flew like that! I feel great-great!"

"Here, Wyne," said Rys, producing a set of Wyne's clothes from her Bottomless Bag. "Put these on."

"Okay-kay!" Wyne assented, tossing the underwear to the side like it didn't bear mentioning and pulling the poncho down over her head.

Rys, however, had anticipated Wyne's refusal to wear her underwear. She didn't waste a second snatching up the discarded garments and went to put them on Wyne's body herself.

"Myeh?!" Wyne exclaimed, squirming at the sensation. "Feels gross-gross..." she muttered as she finished getting dressed.

"Now, now, Wyne," Rys said, smirking wryly at the dragonewt's behavior. "You know you have to wear your undergarments. Tanya is always telling you so too, isn't she? Now, let's head for Delulhi." She took Wyne by the hand and began walking in the direction of the city.

"Nghhh... But it feels gross-gross..." Wyne complained, still squirming as she followed alongside.



The city of Delulhi, capital of Indol, was surrounded by a formidable wall of stone and brick. As Rys approached the gates, she produced a letter of introduction and handed it over to the guard on duty, who was dressed in a white cloth uniform. "Here you go!" she said with a smile. "A letter of introduction from Mister Esto's association."

"Everything seems to be in order," remarked the guard. "You may enter."

Rys carried Chibilio in her arms as the guard showed her and Wyne into the city. No sooner had they made it in, however, than they encountered a number of soldiers making their way to the gate in evident haste.

“Are the rumors true?” asked one of the soldiers. “Did a creature resembling a dragon make landfall on the other side of the dunes?”

“No doubt about it,” answered another. “The lookouts could see it clearly from the high tower.”

“We need to investigate,” said a third.

Rys glanced over her shoulders as the soldiers made their way outside the city walls. *They must have seen Wyne, I suppose...* she thought as she continued into the city. *Oh well. Next time we'll just have to land a bit farther away.*

The three stepped foot into the metropolis of Delulhi. All around them were rows of buildings made of fired brick. The people in the streets wore light, breathable clothes designed for comfort in the climate, which was sweltering hot year-round, topped with hoods as they went about their business to protect themselves from the fierce sun rays.

“Phew!” Rys sighed, taking a wide-brimmed hat out of the Bottomless Bag on her belt and putting it on. “It really is as hot as they say!”

“It’s hot, but it’s not humid-humid!” Wyne exclaimed happily, stretching as they walked through the streets.

“Make sure you don’t go wandering off, Wyne,” Rys cautioned her.

“Okay, mama!” said the dragonewt, wrapping her arm around Rys’s. Grinning from ear to ear, she nuzzled her cheek against Rys’s shoulder.

“Oh, Wyne. Whatever am I to do with you?” Rys simpered despite herself at her adoptive daughter’s fawning behavior. *Come to think of it, Wyne is always doing her best to look after her younger siblings at home, she thought. She deserves to be spoiled a bit from time to time.*

Rys looked around, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. “Er...” she started. “Now where did Esto tell us his shop was, again...?” Chibilio grabbed Rys’s arm and began leading her down one of the streets leading away from the town

gates. “Oh? Chibilio, do you know where Esto’s shop is?” Chibilio nodded, giving one of Flio’s familiar easygoing smiles. “Then please, lead the way!” Rys smiled joyfully back at him.

And so, the three of them entered a street lined with shops as far as the eye could see.

◇Indol—Delulhi Shopping Street—Esto’s Shop◇

Luna the high elf looked like a young maiden, but in fact she was well past her first century and a half in years. She found herself surrounded by men in black attire. “Wh-What is the meaning of this?!” she demanded, squaring her shoulders with anger. “We paid those debts in full!”

The men sneered cruelly at her. “Hey, missy!” jeered one of the men. “Don’t tell me you’ve been sleepwalking all these years! You’re in some real hot water!”

“Everything you’ve paid so far has just been interest, understand? *Interest*,” added another, shoving a piece of paper into Luna’s hands. “You still gotta pay the actual debt!”

Luna’s eyes went wide as she read what was written. “Th-There’s no way this is in order!” she protested, shoving the paper in the man’s face and jabbing her finger at some of the fishier numbers. “You’ve even changed the total sum of money owed!”

One man laughed as he pushed Luna away. “Please, enough with the false allegations.”

“I don’t suppose you have any *proof* that the paperwork has been tampered with?” said another. “Besides, this is a Magic Record! We couldn’t change it if we wanted to. And Mister Esto’s thumbprint is right here, clear as day...”

Magic Records couldn’t be rewritten once they were set down. They were enchanted by the mages at the city’s public office to serve as a permanent record. If a Magic Record ever were modified, there would be characters along the right-hand corner displaying how many times the document had been edited. It was clear as day that the numbers had been changed, but the contract bore no indication of any tampering.

“Nhh...” Luna read and reread the paper time and time again, but she could find no proof at all that anything had been changed. All she could do was sputter in futility.

The men surrounding her sneered. “Listen, all you gotta do is pay off the rest of your debt, in full. If you don’t got the money—”

“Excuse me, may I take a look at that?” Suddenly, a woman interrupted the conversation, snatching the paper out of Luna’s hand. “What do you think, Chibilio?” she asked, handing the Magic Record to the small boy standing next to her. “Can you see anything off with this note?”

The woman—Rys—watched as Chibilio stared intently at the paper. After a short while, he pointed his finger at the spot where the sum of the loan was recorded. The numbers vanished, replaced by a different, much smaller sum.

Luna’s eyes opened wide in shock. “Yes! That’s it!” she exclaimed, pointing at the Record. “That was the sum we agreed to!”

Chibilio, who didn’t seem to be able to speak, took a piece of paper from the shop’s memorandum and began to write. When he finished, he handed the paper to Rys, who nodded studiously as she read. “My Chibilio says, ‘Letters or numbers written in a Magic Records cannot be altered once both parties have applied their thumbprint. That’s why, instead of altering the Record, they covered the actual numbers up by placing the image of their falsified figures above the paper itself. Looking at it with my Identify spell, it was obvious that it had been added later.’ Is that right?”

Luna leaned in, spurred on by Rys’s words. “Excuse me, did I hear that correctly?! Forging a Magic Record is a serious crime, you know! This is grounds for me to bring a suit against your boss, understand?!” she huffed angrily, hands on her hips.

The men’s earlier sneering demeanor had vanished completely. Now they were glaring at Luna, eyes full of spite. “So. Guess you found us out.”

“And here I was hoping things wouldn’t have to get violent...” grumbled another, placing his hand on Luna’s shoulder.

“What? What?! Excuse me, what do you think you’re doing?! Don’t touch

me!” Despite her brave words, however, both Luna’s face and voice betrayed no small amount of fear.

“L-Leave Luna alone!” Esto shouted as fiercely as he could, bursting into the shop floor from the back room. A timid man by nature, Esto preferred to let Luna deal with frightening customers like these men, but he had come running the moment he sensed she was in danger.

“M-Master!” Luna cried, tears of joy brimming in her eyes at the sight of Esto’s hidden courage.

Esto’s courage, however, wasn’t much use. One of the men in black punched him in the face and with a cry of “Ackhblth!” he fell to the floor, unconscious.

“Master...” Luna’s shoulders drooped, her expression darkening once again. “That wasn’t very impressive, you know...”

Two of the men stepped up to Rys and Wyne, clearly intending them harm. Rys, however, simply seized the man by his wrist and tossed him right out the shop door. “Unseemly brutes!” she cried. “Begone!”

“Begone-begone!” echoed Wyne. Copying Rys, she grabbed her would-be assailant by the arm and hurled him outside.

Both of the men had been tall and muscular—easily twice Rys and Wyne’s total mass. But the pair had tossed them as if they weighed nothing. They landed headfirst in the garbage heap on the street corner, thoroughly confused as to what had happened.

The rest of the thugs, who had just watched their companions be picked up and thrown, got on guard. “H-How dare you?!”

“Don’t think we’ll go lightly on you just ‘cause you’re a bunch of women!” Wielding swords and cruel sickle-like blades, the men stood to face off against Rys.

Rys, however, took one look at the men and sighed. “It’s such a bother, dealing with people who can’t tell when they’re outmatched...”

“Me!” volunteered Wyne, bouncing up and down. “You don’t gotta do anything, mama! Let me do it! Let me!” She stepped out in front of Rys,

cheerfully stretching her arms.

Chibilio stepped out even farther in front of Wyne, blocking her from fighting.

“Chibilio?” Rys called. “You get back. Wyne, you too. Leave this to mama, okay?” She held out both hands, one for Chibilio and one for Wyne.

Chibilio, however, shook his head and turned to face the men.

“Hah! Whatcha gonna do, pip-squeak?” said one.

“Just holding out your hand in front of you...” scoffed another.

They drew closer to Chibilio, grinning wickedly. But before they could get within reach, a magic circle appeared at Chibilio’s fingertips. It shone and began to revolve, when suddenly, the men menacing him fell to the ground at once.

“Wh-What the hell?! I can’t move...”

“I-I’m being forced down!”

The men tried as hard as they could to move their bodies, but found themselves completely unable to even struggle.

Rys looked down at Chibilio with a surprised expression on her face. “Th-This is Gravitation, isn’t it? My lord husband’s specialty?”

Chibilio looked back at Rys over his shoulder and quietly nodded.

“I see!” marveled Rys. “So you can do such things as well!”

Wyne sulked and stomped her feet. “Ngh! How come I didn’t get to beat ’em up?! How come?!”

Luna, who had gone to attend to Esto’s injuries, couldn’t help cracking a smile at her antics.

◇Later◇

Once Chibilio’s Gravitation spell had rendered the men fully unconscious, Rys and Wyne bound them up with rope, reported the crime, and left them outside the front of the shop for the city guards to collect. When they got back inside, Luna looked up from tending to Esto to apologize to and thank Rys. “I am so sorry that the honored wife of Lord Flio should have seen our family in such a pitiful state. I thank you for your aid,” she said, bowing again and again.

“It’s lovely to see you again, Miss Luna,” said Rys. “I actually came today hoping to buy more cloth, but might I ask what that commotion earlier was all about?”

Luna furrowed her brow. “The truth is, when my master Esto first opened this shop, he did so as an independent merchant. Nobody would lend him the money he needed on account of his youth, until an organization calling themselves the Shadow Conglomerate said they would provide the funds. We used their money to set up everything here, but...” She sighed deeply.

“I can take it from here,” said Esto, opening his eyes and sitting up. He had been resting his head in Luna’s lap. “Thanks to the enormous purchase you made the other day, Lady Rys, we were able to pay off all the debt we took on when we opened this place, as well as replenish our stock. And then today, they showed up with that illegally modified Magic Record to try to demand more money from us! Frankly, we’ve been confused and frightened!”

“Master...” said Luna, hugging Esto tight. “Were you hiding in the back of the shop this whole time? I was worried they’d gotten you!”

“I’m sorry, Luna...” Esto said, hugging her back. “I was so scared...”

“You did show some guts at the end...” Luna remarked. “Although after that, you got taken down in one hit.”

“Gh...” Esto choked. “I’m so sorry... I couldn’t do anything...”

“Still, it made me happy to see you mustering your courage.”

“Luna...”

“Master...” The two gazed into each other’s eyes, lovestruck.

Rys smirked to herself as she watched. *Hm... she thought. Those two really had better get a room, rather than doing that on the shop floor...*

“What’re they doing?” Wyne asked, peering curiously after Esto and Luna. “What’re they doing, mama?”

Rys stepped in front of Wyne’s field of view, blocking Esto and Luna’s public display of affection from sight. “Erm...” she sputtered, searching for a way to distract Wyne. “Y-You know, those men were only underlings, after all. It’s like

my lord husband says: the way to get rid of a bad smell is to find the source!”

◇Indol—A Room in the Back Alleys◇

In a room in a building somewhere, a woman in a slightly worn black gothic lolita outfit was receiving a report from men in not so dissimilar black clothing. “What was that?!” she exclaimed when they were finished. “You failed to recover the money? The collections team was arrested?!” She unslung the oversized abacus she wore and began making furious calculations as she processed the information. “Impossible...” she muttered, staring darkly at the beads in her abacus. “I was sure I accounted for every variable...”

A woman in a much nicer gothic lolita outfit danced into the room, her unnaturally large eyes open wide. “Oh me, oh my, oh dear, oh goodness, oh gracious, oh no!” she sang. “Hya ha ha ha ha!” She cackled wickedly, her pitch-black eyes opening even wider still.

“Yanderena...” grumbled Shanderena. “Shut up.”

“So baaaaaasically,” Yanderena started, “it sounds like you need little ol’ Yanderena to go take care of this, riiiiight?”

“That’s right. The Shadow King himself entrusted us with the Indol branch of the Shadow Conglomerate. And with the loss we incurred when the demon magic beast contract failed to pay...well, any more mistakes might put His Majesty in a rather *murderous* mood...”

The two shared a glance, and both girls grinned with fierce determination.

◇Houghtow City—Blossom Acres◇

It was coming up on the middle of the day, and the weather in the temperate climate of Houghtow City was as pleasant as ever. Two kobolds—Tyrus and Chilala—came trotting up to Blossom as she worked on the farm she managed outside of Flio’s house.

“Miss Blossom! I’ve finished harvesting the vegetables!” said Tyrus.

“And I finished weeding!” added Chilala.

Blossom wiped her brow as she surveyed the fields around her. “Good job, you too! Just a bit more and I reckon it’ll be time for us all to take a break.”

A chorus of replies rang out.

“Okay!”

“Understood!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Here and there in the fields were goblins and kobolds hard at work. Some of them carried baskets for harvesting produce, while others held sickles for trimming the stubborn grass or hoes for cultivating the soil, depending on their tasks.

“I remember when it was just me and Maunty and Hokh’hokton...” Blossom remarked. “Feels like it became a whole community here in the blink of an eye!”

“Indeed...” mused Maunty as he walked up to Blossom. Maunty was carrying a large hoe hefted over his shoulder. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“It’s all thanks to the peace treaty between the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode,” Blossom said. “Without that, we wouldn’t’ve been able to hire all these out-of-work demons...”

“Quite right,” Maunty agreed. “This farm has become fairly well-known among demons. After all, you give us three square meals and liquor every day. The lodgings, tools, and clothes are all free, and you pay a good wage on top of all that!”

“Of course!” said Blossom. “That’s just how Lord Flio does things! He didn’t want all those demon folks who lost their jobs as mercenaries to lose their way, so he decided to give ’em a place to go. He’s been proactively recruiting them for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store and this here farm.”

Maunty smiled and nodded.

“By the way, Maunty...” Blossom went on to say.

“What is it, my Lady Blossom?”

“I was just wondering... How many children of yours are there working the farm these days?”

“Forty-one boys and girls!” Maunty replied. “Ten of them have already grown up to be splendid adults!”

“Family got bigger yet again, I see...” Blossom noted.

“That it did!” said Maunty. “And it sounds like it’s going to get bigger again next week!”

“O-Oh! I... I see...”

“Indeed! I, Maunty, will continue to work ever harder, for the sake of my family!” Maunty proclaimed, flexing his arm.

“That’s right,” Blossom said. “You and your family are all a bunch of serious, hardworking folk. Not at all like *someone* I could name...” Grinning wryly, Blossom turned to look off towards one corner of the farm, where Telbyress sat slumped on the ground in the middle of a field of ripening eggenplants.

“Hahhh...” the former goddess sighed, miserably staring up to the heavens. “Honestly, why do I have to do all this weeding?!” she lamented. “I used to be a goddess, you know! I miss lounging around in air-conditioned rooms on the Celestial Plane, wearing a different outfit every day, partaking of the finest teas and sweets as I managed my world from a distance... I seriously can’t believe I’m sweating in the sun, working in a place like this...” Telbyress was wearing a farmworker’s outfit, complete with a straw hat, and long rubber boots. Dressed like that, she didn’t look out of place in the slightest on the farm. “I’ll just slack off until lunch...” With that, she settled in with a rustling sound among the leafy vegetables.

Telbyress was shocked out of her rest by Hokh’hokton’s face appearing suddenly in her field of view. “You no-gooddness!” the goblin snapped. “I had a feeling you were slacking off over here!”

“Eeek!” the no-gooddness shrieked. “H-Hokey! Don’t shove your face at me out of the blue like that!”

“You’re the one who decided to shirk! No complaints!” Hokh’hokton grabbed Telbyress by the collar and struggled to pull her to her feet.

“O-Ow! Ow, ow! But my butt, Hokey! My butt is gonna break if I keep working!”

“I’m certain your butt will be fine! Now, get back to work! Somewhere I can see you!”

“Hokey! How come you’re being so mean?!”

“Because all you do is slack off, that’s why!”

“And you say such horrible things...”

“No complaints, I tell you! Madame Zofina specifically asked me to fix that rotten personality of yours, after all! Now, on your feet! Up and at ’em!”

“No! I won’t! Be nice to me!”

Blossom shook her head at the overheard conversation. “That former goddess hasn’t changed a bit, has she...?”

“She has not...” Maunty agreed. “Even with Hokh’hokton’s constant supervision, she hasn’t improved in the slightest...”

Off in the fields, they could still hear the sound of Hokh’hokton and Telbyress arguing furiously.

◇Indol—A Building in the Back Alleys◇

“Now,” said Shanderena, “we really must pay them a *friendly visit* to collect what we’re owed.” Still fiddling with her abacus, she marched out of the room and down the hallway.

“Mess with us and you’re dead!” Yanderena cried, hurling her body to the floor and thrashing about theatrically. “You’re dead, you’re dead, you’re deeeaaad!!!” she sang, trailing off into a high-pitched shriek.

The two made up their mind to pay a visit to Esto’s shop themselves to check in on the report from their subordinates, the men in black. Shanderena, followed closely by Yanderena, threw the building’s doors open and stormed out to the alleyway.

No sooner had they stepped foot outside, however, than they found themselves face-to-face with Rys, Wyne, and Chibilio. “Excuse me!” said Rys, bowling the pair over as she forced her way past. “I’m coming in!”

“Wha—?!” exclaimed Shanderena.

“Wha-haaaaaa?!” Yanderena cried.

Carried on by Rys’s momentum, the two found themselves pushed back inside, where they landed in a heap. Rys didn’t bother stopping to check on them before beginning her search of the building, sniffing with her sensitive nose as she looked this way and that. “There’s no mistaking that scent... Those men in black must have fled here!” As a lupine demon, Rys had exceptionally keen olfactory senses. She had followed the men by scent all the way to their hideout. She nodded, satisfied she had found her mark, before turning to face Shanderena and Yanderena, who were still lying facedown on the floor. “You two were on your way out of this building, weren’t you? I don’t suppose you have anything to do with the Shadow Conglomerate? My name is Rys. I would like to have some words with you about the affair regarding Esto’s shop, if I may be so bold.”

Just as Rys was getting started, though, numerous men came running out down the stairs at the end of the hallway.

“What was that sound?!”

“Is something happening?!”

“Don’t tell me the city guards are here!”

The black-garbed men emerged at the foot of the stairs to see Rys standing at the end of the hallway—her slender, curvaceous body...her classically beautiful face...her silver-blue hair fluttering in the breeze...

“Wh-Who the hell is *she*?”

“Sh-She’s beautiful...”

“She’s out of this world...”

The men stood, at a loss for words, enraptured by Rys’s beauty.

Shanderena and Yanderena pulled themselves to their feet, fixing their clothing. Their outfits had gotten a bit disheveled in their earlier tumble. “Wh-What are you idiots doing?!” Shanderena demanded. “Attack! Attack!”

“Come on! Get to it! Slaughter! Slaughter! Slaughteer!” Yanderena added in her usual singsong.

Scolded, the men suddenly seemed to remember what they were supposed to be doing. “R-Right! I forgot!” said one of them.

“Her beauty really distracts from the fact that she’s an enemy...” added another.

They rushed forward, closing in on Rys. Some of them clearly had wicked thoughts on their minds. It looked like they were as likely to force themselves on Rys as drive her away.

“Miserable wretches...” Rys growled, transforming into her full lupine form. But before she could act, Chibilio stepped out in front of her, holding both arms before the men. A magic circle appeared as he once more cast the spell Gravitation. The men fell unceremoniously to the floor, completely immobilized.

Rys transformed back into her customary human form. “Chibilio,” she said, frowning as she pinched the magic beast doll’s cheeks, “I’m happy you’re so concerned for my safety, but I really was hoping to be able to fight a little myself...”

Chibilio, however, gave an easygoing smile, just as Flio always did, and shook his head. It seemed he refused to place Rys in any danger.

“Hmph...” Rys pouted.

“Hey! I wanted to fight too!” exclaimed Wyne, jumping up and down in frustration as she registered a complaint of her own. “Me too!”

Rys checked to make sure that the men were all unconscious, then moved to stand at the end of the hallway, blocking Shanderena and Yanderena’s escape. “Now then, you two. I gather you have some authority in the Shadow Conglomerate. Perhaps we can have a little chat about the affair regarding Esto’s shop?”

Shanderena and Yanderena shook before Rys’s gaze.

I-I can’t even speak! Shanderena thought in terror. *This she-wolf is far too terrifying!*

H-H-H-H-How am I supposed to say anything in front of that

moooooooooonster?! Yanderena lamented.

The two had seen Rys in her lupine form. It was a sight that had terrified them so thoroughly that now all they could do was press up against the wall and tremble in fear. Fed up with their silence, Rys snarled impatiently.

“E-E-Eeeeeeeeeek!!!” the women shrieked in unison.

◇Later◇

The Delulhi guards had been busily milling in and out of the Shadow Conglomerate’s building for some time now. Rys, Wyne, and Chibilio stood to the side, speaking with the guard captain.

“Thank you for your report, Lady Rys,” he said, bowing deeply. “The Shadow Conglomerate’s unlawful activities have been causing a great deal of trouble for the people of Indol, but thanks to the information you gave us, we were able to wipe out their headquarters. We had been having so much trouble finding a proper lead that we had to call for assistance from the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. But now we should finally be able to bring this to a close.”

“No need to thank me!” chirped Rys with a cheerful smile. “I just did what anyone would have!”

As they were speaking, the guards passed by taking Shanderena and Yanderena away. “Don’t forget—this isn’t over!” said Shanderena. “Not for me, and not for the Shadow King!”

“I’ll, I’ll, I’ll, I’ll, I’ll be baaaaaack!” sang Yanderena.

The two of them were wrapped up tight in bandages, unable to move their bodies. Despite their bluster, they needed the guards to carry them. It was quite the comical sight. Rys watched as the two were loaded into the guards’ carriage. “Villains always have a lot to say when they’re defeated, I suppose.” She sighed. The carriage set off, surrounded by an armed escort, and Rys turned her attention back to the guard captain, taking a bundle of papers out from her Bottomless Bag. “I got this from those women. It seems to be a list of methods the Shadow Conglomerate has for illegally acquiring money.”

“Well, now!” said the guard captain, accepting the list. “This will be a great help! With this, we’ll put an end to the Shadow Conglomerate for good!”

“Thank you very much for your efforts,” Rys said. “I hope we can settle things without Esto or their other victims coming to any further harm.”

“Of course! You have my word!” the captain said, bowing deeply once again.

“If that’s all, then, we’ll be heading back to Esto’s shop. I have to finish my shopping so I can return home in time to prepare dinner!”

“Lady Rys, you reside within Indol?” the guard asked.

“Oh, no,” Rys answered. “I live outside of Houghtow City. Now, I’d best be off!” And with that she walked away, leading Chibilio by the hand.

“No fair!” Wyne complained as she trotted along behind. “I didn’t get to fight at all! Not at all!” She puffed out her cheeks in a childish pout, upset that she had yet to see any action.

“Houghtow...” the guard repeated, cocking his head quizzically. “Is there a city of that name in this region? I believe I’ve heard of such a city in the Magic Kingdom of Klyrode, but it would take them two months by carriage to travel that far! She certainly wouldn’t be home in time for dinner...”

Behind him, the guards were hard at work confiscating every last scrap of paper from the Shadow Conglomerate building.

◇Meanwhile—Near the Shadow Conglomerate Building◇

Nearby, a man and two women were hiding behind a building, watching the proceedings. The Shadow Conglomerate building was surrounded by an impressive number of city guards, who were rounding up all the relevant paperwork they could find.

The heavy-set man—the Shadow King himself—clicked his tongue in irritation. “What is the meaning of this?” he demanded. “The Indol Shadow Conglomerate is the biggest branch outside of the Magical Kingdom! If *they’re* being raided by the guards...”

Kintsuno the Gold stood behind him, wearing her customary golden cheongsam and chewing on her thumb in frustration. “That dark-tempered abacus woman and the dancing lady should have been watching over this place...” she muttered. “Shanderena and Yanderena, I believe. What do they

think they're doing, letting it come to this?"

Her sister, Gintsuno the Silver, slumped her shoulders in exhaustion. "And after all we went through getting to Indol..." She sighed. "What are we going to do now, Shadow King?"

"I don't know!" the Shadow King snapped. "Shut up and let me think!"

Suddenly, a guard turned in their direction. "Hey! Is someone over there? I hear voices!"

"They might be members of the Shadow Conglomerate!" said the guard captain, who was a sturdy, muscular man. "You there, with me!" Leading a handful of guards, he ran off towards the building where the Shadow King and demon fox sisters were hiding.

"D-Damnation!" the Shadow King sputtered, taking off as fast as his legs would carry him. "Hurry! Run!"

"R-Run?" Kintsuno yipped. "But where to?!"

"We can figure that out as we get away! Hurry!" barked the Shadow King.

"Hang on!" Gintsuno protested. "If we can't get our money out of that building, we'll have nothing left!"

"We can worry about that *after* we get away!"

They ran through the backstreets, arguing as quietly as they could as they made their escape.

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

After class, Garyl was called to the school's reception lounge by Taclyde, the school administrator. Belano, Garyl's homeroom teacher, was sitting next to him. A man sat on the sofa across from them, dressed in the chivalric cape only permitted to be worn by a knight in service of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. He smiled when Garyl entered the room.

"Well now, Garyl! It's been a long while, hasn't it?! How have you been?"

"I've been all right," Garyl answered, smiling back. "How about you, Mister MacTaulo?"

“Quite well, thanks to your father!”

“You were the captain of the Klyrode Knights, right?”

“I was, aye. But with our new peace treaty with the Dark Army in place, I’ve decided to retire from active duty. We’re setting up a new academy to help raise the next generation of knights, and I’ve been asked to serve as headmaster.” The old knight took a sip from his cup of tea before looking up at the boy across from him. “In fact, I’m here today in just that capacity. Tell me, Garyl, do you have any interest in enrolling in the Klyrode Knight Academy?”

“Huh? Me?” Garyl asked, blinking in surprise.

MacTaulo nodded. “That’s right! I’ve been going all around the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode looking for promising young boys and girls to join me in the academy. We would love to have you. We’re prepared to offer you a full scholarship as well.”

“Hm...” Garyl gave the matter some thought. “Well, I’ve always wanted to work for Miss Ellie—er, I mean, for Her Majesty someday...”

“Yes, I am well aware,” MacTaulo remarked. “Boralis tells me you’ve already saved Her Majesty’s life numerous times. If you graduate from the Klyrode Knight Academy, you’ll qualify to join the knighthood right away, if that’s something that would appeal to you.” Belano nodded eagerly, encouraging Garyl to take MacTaulo up on his offer.

Garyl, however, seemed to come to a conclusion on his own. “Well, thank you for the offer! I’m really glad you thought of me!” he said, a big, genuine smile on his face. “But is it okay if I hold off for a bit?”

“Does that mean you refuse the offer?”

“That’s right,” Garyl said plainly, without hesitation. “I love the Houghtow College of Magic! I wanna graduate from this school before I go to your academy.”

MacTaulo looked the boy in the eyes. Garyl met his gaze without flinching. “I see,” MacTaulo said, smiling to himself. “In that case, I will look forward to the day you graduate from the Houghtow College of Magic and join us at the Klyrode Knight Academy.”

“Yeah! I’ll see you then!” Then, Garyl stood up from the sofa and bowed.

MacTaulo offered his hand and Garyl shook it, when suddenly the door to the lounge burst open. A throng of students came falling through the door, tripping over themselves and landing in a huge pile. Garyl’s classmates Salina, Irystiel, and Sadjitta were there, as were others Garyl knew less well.

Belano’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “Eavesdropping is wrong...” she scolded in her quiet, faltering voice.

“But!” Salina protested, leaning forward urgently. “But I heard Lord Garyl might be transferring to another school! I couldn’t help myself!”

Next to her, Irystiel held up not one but two plush dolls, making them speak with her proficient ventriloquism.

“But Garyl said he’s staying here!” said one of the dolls.

“Irystiel’s really happy! Mreowr!” the second said.

“Good!” huffed Sadjitta. “I need to beat you at least once before I graduate, so you’d better stick around!” He held his head high, speaking as if he were some kind of rival to Garyl.

The other students, however, regarded Sadjitta with a sardonic side-eyed glance. “*You’re* going to defeat Lord Garyl, Sadjitta?” Salina asked. “I’ll believe *that* when I see it!”

“There’s no way!” said one of Irystiel’s dolls.

“Not in a million years!” growled the other.

“Sh-Shut up!” Sadjitta protested, his face turning bright red. “I-I’m doing my best, you know! I’ll get there any day now!” The other students all burst into laughter, the sound filling every corner of the reception lounge.

MacTaulo smiled kindly at the assembled students. “Well, I think I can see why Garyl is so keen to stay here until graduation,” he observed. “This is a good school.”

Belano nodded earnestly.

MacTaulo spent some time talking with the students after that before

eventually taking his leave of the Houghtow College of Magic.

◇Indol—Esto's Shop◇

“Really, I don’t know how I can *possibly* thank you!” Esto exclaimed, beaming with delight as Luna bowed over and over again, her long ears bobbing up and down every time she lowered her head.

Rys had returned to the store with good news. “Everyone involved with the Shadow Conglomerate’s immoral business has been arrested,” she’d told them. “I don’t believe they’ll come here again.” Esto and Luna had been so overjoyed that they had forgotten all propriety, hugging each other tight and jumping for joy.

“Take all the time you like looking over our merchandise, Lady Rys,” Luna told her. “We’ll give you a big discount as thanks for today! Master, would you please bring more textiles for the lady?”

“Right away! Just for you, Lady Rys, I’ll bring out our secret reserve!”

Rys smiled as she looked over the merchandise on offer, but something was clearly bothering her. “Um...” she started. “Thank you. I’m delighted to have so many different fabrics to choose from! But...what in the world is happening outside?” She turned to look out the shop entrance, where an enormous crowd of people was gathered at the door, staring right at her.

“I think that’s her!” shouted someone in the crowd. “She’s the one who broke up the Shadow Conglomerate!”

“Yeah, no mistake,” another man agreed. “I saw her with the guard captain earlier.”

“Thank the gods! With them gone, we can finally do business in peace!”

“We can live our lives without jumping at every shadow!”

“Lady Rys...” someone rhapsodized. “What an incredible person...”

This whole crowd, it turned out, had come here to catch a glimpse of the woman who brought down the infamous Shadow Conglomerate. Rys, however, decided to ignore them. She turned her attention back to the cloth. “I need to hurry and make up my mind so I can be home in time to make dinner! Miss

Luna, might I have as much of this cloth with the blue embroidery as you have in stock? And I wonder, does this red and green weave here come in any other patterns?”

“Of course!” Luna said, smiling from ear to ear. “I’ll bring them for you right away, my lady!”

Rys watched as Luna went to retrieve the cloth from the storeroom in the back of the shop, then looked back at the cloth, touching it lightly with her fingertips to assess its quality, her eyes dead serious. Chibilio stood at the ready behind her, storing the cloth Rys picked out in his Bottomless Bag.

The crowd outside the store kept watching as Rys carefully examined the merchandise.

“She’s so pretty...”

“Did a beautiful woman like her really break up the Shadow Conglomerate all on her own?”

“Maybe they were distracted by her looks...”

“I can imagine that. They had those two creepy women in charge, after all...”

“Still, there’s no denying that she’s gorgeous.”

As the onlookers discussed Rys’s beauty, Wyne strolled up behind her munching on a roast bird leg. Wyne had no interest in textiles whatsoever, so Esto had prepared something for her to eat instead. “This tandoori chinkin thing is good-good!” she declared with a mouth full of poultry, grinning as she ate.



Suddenly, a number of guards came pushing their way through the crowd in front of the store. “Esto!” their leader called over the hubbub. “Is Esto within these premises?”

“Y-Yes!” cried Esto as he hurried out of the back room where he had gone to retrieve more textiles. “Here I am!”

The guard nodded, acknowledging Esto, then glanced around the inside of the shop where Rys was still deeply focused on picking out her cloth. “Well met, Esto. I suppose that woman is the one they call Lady Rys, then?”

“Y-Yes, that she is...?” Esto replied, slightly confused.

Having confirmed Rys’s identity, the guards marched up behind Rys and fell into an orderly row behind her. “Lady Rys,” their leader stated, saluting sharply. The rest of the guards followed suit, saluting Rys in unison. “I am Musainmad, high commander of the Delulhi guard.” With his introduction finished, Musainmad knelt down and lowered his head in a display of deep gratitude. His retinue knelt down as well at his signal, lowering their heads like their commander. “In recognition of your meritorious deeds leading to the capture of Shadow Conglomerate personnel, our liege lord His Majesty Dhalsam would like to award you the Crest of Indol. No doubt you have your own pressing matters to attend to, but might we impose on you to accompany us to Delulhi Palace?”

At Musainmad’s words, the crowd outside let out a cheer.

“Th-The Crest of Indol?!” one of the onlookers exclaimed.

“And directly from the king?!” gasped another.

“Incredible! It’s been years since the crest was last awarded!”

“Maybe, but I guess it makes sense. She *did* wipe out the Shadow Conglomerate, after all!”

Everyone was excitedly celebrating Rys’s award, as happy as if they had won it themselves. They began to chant a loud chorus of “Rys! Rys! Rys!” drawing even more onlookers to come see what was happening.

Rys, however, seemed to pay no mind to the commotion at all. She went on focusing with single-minded intensity on the cloth. She didn’t so much as pause

her hands in response to Musainmad's entreaty.

"E-Excuse me..." Musainmad tried. "Lady Rys? There is a carriage waiting outside to take you to the palace..."

Finally, Rys seemed to realize she was being spoken to. She turned around, smiling kindly. "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid I must decline," she said, turning back to continue inspecting the cloth Luna had prepared for her. "I need to purchase this cloth quickly so that I can be home in time to prepare dinner."

"Huh? D-Dinner preparations...you say?" Musainmad was baffled. "Erm...I don't believe the ceremony will take long..."

"No, thank you," answered Rys.

"Well," Musainmad offered, "the palace does have a kitchen of its own. Perhaps your family can join us for dinner...?"

"Oh, but I already set out an entire meal to cook when I got home..." Rys said.

"Then perhaps His Majesty could pay your family a royal visit?" ventured the increasingly befuddled commander of the guard.

"I'm afraid it's quite a distance to travel," Rys told him. "I really must decline."

"Erm..."

"Was that all?" Rys asked. When Musainmad failed to answer, she turned back to the cloth, seeming to once again shut out the entire rest of the world. "Miss Luna, do you happen to have this cloth in any other colors? Oh, and I would like three cuts of this fabric, all in different colors please."

"Huh?" Luna blinked, a little confused herself by Rys's conversation with Musainmad. "O-Oh! Yes! Right away!" she exclaimed, swiftly moving to the back of the shop.



After her encounter with the guards, Rys finished picking out the cloth she wanted and made her purchase. "Well, we've done what we came for," Rys said. "Wyne, Chibilio, are you ready to go home?"

"Okay, mama!" Wyne said, grinning and raising her hand. Chibilio nodded

silently.

Musainmad glanced at Rys from behind, nervous sweat running down his brow. “L-Lady Rys!” he voiced, hurrying over as she made her way to the store exit. “Is there truly no way I can persuade you to accompany me to the palace? Even as a personal request? It won’t have to take long.”

Rys stopped in her tracks and sighed. “Well, if it really means so much to you, I suppose it would be rude to send you back empty-handed...”

“S-So you’ll come?!” Musainmad exclaimed, a smile of relief coming to his face.

Rys, however, turned to face the two shopkeepers. “Mister Esto? Miss Luna?”

“Y-Yes?!” the pair started, reflexively stiffening their backs.

“I’m terribly sorry to trouble you with this, but would you perhaps accompany this man to the palace in my place?”

“Huh?!” Esto, Luna, and Musainmad—indeed, everyone watching—reeled in shock.

“Well then, I’d best be off!” Rys said, smiling cheerfully at the assembled crowd as she made her way out of the store and headed for the city gates.

“W-Wait! Lady Rys?!” Musainmad and his retainers chased after Rys, but when they followed her out of the gates, they were stunned to see no sign of her or the children anywhere. “What a strange person...” Musainmad remarked, pursing his lips up with wry amusement. “I’ve never heard of anyone who would prioritize dinner preparations above the Crest of Indol.”

Just then, an enormous red wyvern burst forth from behind a nearby hill, flapping its wings and ascending high into the sky. “What?! A wyvern?!” The guardsmen quickly drew their weapons, readying themselves for a fight. Musainmad, however, held out his hand to stop them.

“W-Wait...” he began, narrowing his eyes and peering at something on the wyvern’s back. “Up there, riding on the dragon...i-is that Lady Rys?!”

The moment he said the words, the guards all began to cry out as well.

“Lady Rys keeps a dragon for a servant!” marveled one.

“Just like that queen who fought off the Crimson Dragon when it came to destroy Indol!” a second expositied excitedly. “They say the dragon has obeyed her ever since!”

“Lady Rys must be none other than an incarnation of the Dragon Queen!” uttered a third.

“Long live Queen Rys!” someone cheered.

“Long live Queen Rys!”

“Long live Queen Rys!”

“Long live Queen Rys!!!”

More and more guards joined in the rousing chorus with every cheer. Soon it had spread to the people waiting their turn at the gate. Before long, it is said, chants of “Long live Queen Rys” could be heard in every corner of Indol.

◇Meanwhile—In the Sky◇

“I’m terribly sorry, Wyne, but would you mind speeding up just a little bit?” Rys asked. “I spent so much time dealing with that Musainmad man that I’m afraid we’ve fallen behind schedule.”

“Got it, mama! Speed up! Speed up!” Wyne nodded and flapped her wings faster still, picking up speed as they flew along.

Rys leaned over to get a look at the ground from overhead, holding a hand over her hair to keep it from blowing around too much in the wind. “Look, Chibilio!” she said, smiling down at the magic beast doll in her lap. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Chibilio gave her that smile that reminded her so much of Flio, and nodded silently.

An adventure with Chibilio... Rys thought, gently stroking his cheek. *This was quite enjoyable in its own way, but I really do wish my lord husband had been able to come with us...* She closed her eyes.

Suddenly, she heard her husband’s voice in her ear. “Hello, Rys!” Rys’s eyes shot open. She whipped her head around to see Flio sitting behind her. “I finished my work and hurried over with Teleportation,” he said, smiling like he

always did. “Sorry it took so long.”

I thought I’d try Teleporting here by synchronizing my consciousness with Chibilio, he thought. *Looks like everything went well!* He sighed with relief, glad his first test of the technique had succeeded.

Rys’s face lit up the second she laid eyes on Flio. “My lord husband!” she cried, wrapping her arms tight around him. Flio hugged back, squeezing her in turn. For a moment, the two stayed silent in each other’s embrace.

“Ah!” Wyne cried happily, finally noticing that Flio had suddenly appeared on her back. “Dada! It’s dada!”

Wyne seemed eager to chat, but Chibilio had a sense that Flio and Rys might want a bit of privacy. He gave Wyne a pointed look and held his index finger to his lips in the universal gesture for silence. Wyne understood and swallowed her words, turning her full attention to flying.

Rys leaned closer to Flio as they flew through the air. Flio held her gently against his chest. “What now?” he asked. “We could go home right away with Teleportation if you want to.”

“No,” said Rys. “Let’s stay like this...” She closed her eyes, angling her face upwards towards her husband. Flio leaned in, kissing her softly on the lips.

Wyne sped along with Flio, Rys, and Chibilio on her back, heading home to Houghtow City.

◇The Following Morning—Indol◇

“Is this really happening...?” Luna asked, the sight of Delulhi Palace towering before her making her go stiff with nerves.

“W-Well, it was a request from Lady Rys,” said Esto, looking no less stiff than Luna.

Musainmad regarded the couple with a smirk. “Come now, you two are the emissaries of Lady Rys, are you not? Look alive!”

“I-I-I-I-I’m looking as alive as I can!” Luna shot back. “Oh, if it weren’t requested by Lady Rys, I would have never agreed to do something like this!”

“If you can say that much, you’ll probably be fine,” Musainmad told her. “Now

come along! Let's go!"

"H-Hmph..." Luna objected impotently.

"We have to do this, Luna," Esto said. "Let's just get it done."

"V-Very well, Master..."

Musainmad gave Esto a friendly smack on the shoulder as he led Esto and Luna into Delulhi Palace.

That day, King Dhalsam gave the Crest of Indol to Esto and Luna, as proxies for Rys. It was a very strange situation by all accounts, but the pair performed the role that had been forced on them without any particular issues, and before long the award ceremony came to a merciful close.

Epilogue

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

"Wow!" Rynàsze cried, beaming from ear to ear as she twirled about in her new frilly dress. "This dress is so cute!"

"Hee hee!" Rys giggled as she watched her youngest daughter spin. "I'm very glad you like it!"

"I love this outfit!" Elinàsze gushed. "It's simply adorable!"

"They're lovely, mother!" Rynàsze agreed. The two seemed delighted with the outfits Rys had made them with the colorful Indol cloth.

"They really are," said Rislei, a smile on her face. "The last outfits you made were wonderful too, Auntie Rys, but these are just *amazing*!"

"No kidding!" her father Sleip cheered, giving Byleri a great big hug. "Can you believe our super-ultra-absolute cutie Rislei has somehow gotten even cuter?!"

"Like, totally, right?" Byleri agreed, beaming. "It looks, like, crazy good on her!"

"Mama!" Wyne said, bouncing up and down with joy in her new poncho. To everyone's shock, as the hem of her outfit flapped up, they could see that the dragonewt was, for once, actually wearing her underwear. "Mine's super cute too! Super-super cute-cute!"

Tanya nodded, satisfied. "And with this new cloth, we finally have a pair of undergarments that Young Mistress Wyne finds comfortable enough to wear. Mistress Rys, you have truly outdone yourself..."

"Yeah!" said Wyne. "This underwear is okey dokey!"

"Young Mistress Wyne..." Tanya said, tears of joy streaming down her face. "You're finally growing up..." She took out a handkerchief and wiped the tears from her eyes. She was so overcome with emotion, in fact, that she was completely unaware that the thing she was wiping her tears with wasn't a

handkerchief at all—it was one of the pairs of panties she had taken to carrying on her person in case she needed one to replace Wyne’s.

“Wow! These are such cute clothes!” Folmina said, skipping through the house with a grin on her face. “The last ones were good, but these are just as good!”

“Yeah...” said Ghoros, skipping along after Folmina. “You’re really cute, big sis... In the last outfit, and this one too...”

“The last set of clothes made me look tough, but this one’s got style!” Garyl said, checking out his reflection in the living room mirror. *I bet Miss Ellie will love this outfit!* he thought. *I’ll have to wear it next time I talk to her with my communication ring! If I angle it right, she should be able to see as far down as my chest...* A happy smile came to his face as he thought of Ellie, the Maiden Queen.

Belalio and Chibilio, meanwhile, stood behind Garyl, copying his poses exactly.

“Our darling Rabbitz looks adorable in hers too, I’m sure...” said Calsi’im. “But I do wish I could actually see my daughter from time to time!” Rabbitz, dressed in her new clothing, had resumed her customary pose—perched atop Calsi’im’s head with her arms wrapped around his bony skull for support.

“Love papa!” she declared, beaming wide as she nuzzled her cheek against Calsi’im’s jawbone.



“Our little Rabbitz is so adorable when she’s clinging to her papa!” Tia mused as she watched. “Oh, but Calsi’im is quite gallant as well, how he indulges our sweet Rabbitz...” she added, blushing as she gazed at the skeleton she so deeply loved.

The living room was full of children laughing and chatting happily as they enjoyed the new outfits Rys had sewn. Rys watched the scene with a smile on her face. “Hee hee! I’m so glad I asked my lord husband if we might purchase all this cloth! This time I bought even more than the last, so don’t you worry! There’s plenty more where that came from!” She had a piece of fabric in her hands which she was hand-stitching as she talked. Beside her, Balirossa, Belano, and Uliminas were all stitching together pieces of fabric of their own, watching Rys’s hands closely as they worked.

“Let me see...” Balirossa muttered. “This goes here... Um, and then...” she trailed off. “Oh, goodness... I’m so much better at using a sword...”

“It’s harder than teaching magic too, I think...” said Belano.

“Mreowr...” Uliminas yowled in frustration. “But I *do* want to learn how to sew...at least on an amateur level...”

The three were giving it their all but evidently struggling with the task. “Don’t worry,” Rys said, smiling at her students. “You’ve all gotten much better already. Just keep it up and you’ll be experts in no time!”

“Y-Yes!” said Balirossa. “Thank you, Lady Rys! I’ll do my best to see Ghor’s outfit to completion!”

“I want to make something for Minilio and Belalio...” said Belano.

“It would be nice if I could make a couple of outfits for Folmina...” said Uliminas. “Two or three...or meowbe a dozen...”

◇Meanwhile—Flio’s Workshop◇

Flio stood in the basement of his workshop with Ghozal, Hiya, and Damalynas, looking over his handiwork with his usual easygoing smile. “All right,” he said. “Looks like that does it!”

“Mister Flio...” started Ghozal. “Are these...?”

“That’s right.” Flio nodded. “They’re new Enchanted Frigates.”

Indeed, before their eyes were no less than five brand-new magic frigates, all lined up neatly in a row.

“E-Exalted One...” Hiya gulped. “I know you have obtained full knowledge of the construction of an Enchanted Frigate, but how is it you were able to create this many...?”

“Remember the Beast of Disaster bone I got from Zofina the other day?” Flio said. “I thought I would try using it for fabrication. Somehow, I managed to pull it off!”

“Hrm...” Ghozal muttered, folding his arms. “So *this* is the thing you’ve been spending all your time in the workshop for lately... You were making these frigates...”

“Yes, that’s right.” Flio nodded.

“Of course,” said Hiya. “If the Exalted One can create a single ship, it stands to reason that he could create as many as pleases him, as long as he has the materials. *Intellectually*, I understand that...” *But the Enchanted Frigate is a lost technology of an ancient civilization!* they thought to themselves. *For a single man to create five such vessels... Truly, the Exalted One is beyond my comprehension. And to think, I have the privilege of serving him—of glimpsing the deepest truths of existence!* A single tear rolled down Hiya’s cheek at the thought.

“Well, the ships themselves aside...” Damalynas began. “What about the magic gems you need to power them, Lord Flio? An Enchanted Frigate needs a fairly sizable gem, doesn’t it?”

“Well, yes, Damalynas, that’s true,” Flio said. “Do you remember those strange white magic beast corpses Greanyl’s team found so many of?”

“Wh-What?” Damalynas sputtered. “I-It can’t be...”

“That’s right!” Flio said, producing what looked like a magic gem from his Bottomless Bag. “I tried compressing a few, and I ended up creating an artificial magic gem...”

Damalynas took a single look at the gem and balked. “Th-This magic gem is

enormous!” she exclaimed. “And full to the brim with magic power, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Those magic beast carcasses turned out to be incredibly efficient for producing magic gems,” Flio said, looking at the gem in his hand with his usual smile. “Good enough to serve as a power source for an Enchanted Frigate.”

Hiya could only stare in awe. “S-Superb...” they said, weeping tears of quiet passion. “Utterly superb. Exalted One, I beg you...please teach your wretched servant how you accomplished such a feat...”

“Lord Flio!” pleaded Damalynas, her own eyes wet with awe as well. “I’ll do anything for you—just teach me your spells! I’ll even throw away my title as Grand Magus of Midnight if you want!”

Flio smiled awkwardly, flinching back from the two excitable magic users. “I- It’s really nothing that special!” he maintained, holding his hands out in front of him like he was trying to keep Hiya and Damalynas at bay. “I just gave it a try to see if I could, and it was done before I knew it.”

“So, Mister Flio,” said Ghozal, who had been standing to the side with his arms folded over his chest. “You’ve made all these Enchanted Frigates. What are you going to do with them?”

“Well,” said Flio, “the first one I made as a test has been working as a regular ferry, carrying guests from Klyrode Castle Town to Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park and back. I thought maybe we’d increase the number of routes.”

“Routes?” Ghozal repeated.

“That’s right,” Flio said. “The way I see it, if we can use these Enchanted Frigates to connect different regions to each other, it should increase the traffic of both people and merchandise.”

“Hrm...” Ghozal said, mulling over Flio’s words. “I see! Sounds like it could be interesting. It’s worth trying at any rate. But...” It seemed like Ghozal had something more on his mind, but he seemed to think better of it. He cut himself off there and looked up at Flio’s fleet of Enchanted Frigates.

I’m a bit worried about what might happen if someone with bad intentions got their hands on one of the frigates... Ghozal thought. But it’s Mister Flio

managing the operation, after all. He should be more than able to take care of it.

“All I want,” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile, “is for these Enchanted Frigates to help bring happiness to people all over the world.”

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 9

◇Deep in a Forest◇

Deep in a forest located somewhere in the world, surrounded by trees, stood a small wooden cottage. This cottage was where the doppeladler Hugi-Mugi, formerly of the Infernal Four, made their residence, spending their days not in their natural form as a two-headed monstrous bird, but transformed to appear as a human boy.

Right now, the cottage was full of women's voices carrying on in an argument.

"I'm telling you!" huffed Cartha, crossing her arms and puffing out her chest as she glared down the other two women. "I've known Hugi the longest!"

Shino, who today was dressed in a priest's vestments, sprung up from her seat. "That doesn't matter one bit!" she protested, meeting Cartha's furious gaze. "You can meet your destined beloved at any point in your life! You just have to *feel* it!"

Mato, who had been sitting next to Shino, sprung up as well. "I owe Lord Hugi-Mugi my life!" she insisted. "For that reason, it is my intention to stay by his side and serve him for as long as I live!"

The women were caught in a three-way glaring match. Hugi-Mugi, in their human form, sighed heavily as they watched. "How troublesome, yes!" they said, speaking in two distinct voices. "Yes, how long are you going to fight over this?!"

The three women turned at once to face Hugi-Mugi. "Oh, Hugi!" said Cartha. "This is an important matter, you understand! Alas, there are three of us, and only one Hugi!"

"Exactly!" Shino agreed. "And that is why we must discuss which of us is to occupy that one-and-only seat!"

"As for me, I am satisfied merely to be your servant..." Mato acquiesced. "But in truth, if I may be so bold, my heart wishes to be the one you keep closest by

your side...”

The three sidled closer to Hugi-Mugi on the sofa as the doppeladler reeled back, recoiling from their overbearing courtship. “C-Calm down, you three, yes!” they said. “Yes, you are being much too pushy!”

“We *have* to be pushy, Hugi!” Cartha pleaded. “The rest of our lives are riding on this!”

“The two women we decide are unfit to become Hugi’s bride must graciously withdraw from the contest,” Shino explained.

“To be honest,” added Mato, “I am afraid I can no longer conceive of a life without my Lord Hugi-Mugi...”

The three sidled up closer still, until their faces were inches away from Hugi-Mugi’s. “S-So, yes...” Hugi-Mugi said. “You all want to be my bride, yes?”

“Yes!” the three nodded in unison, their faces turning red before Hugi-Mugi’s eyes.

Hugi-Mugi looked from Cartha to Shino to Mato. “Yes, I see... I am very fond of you three as well, yes. Yes, very fond.”

“I-I’m glad to hear that,” Cartha said. “But...”

“Only one of us can be your wife,” said Shino.

“Unfortunate as it is...” Mato added.

“It’s quite okay, yes! Yes, quite okay! All three of you can marry me, yes! After all, I am a demon!” said Hugi-Mugi.

“Huh?”

“What?”

“Excuse me?”

The three women stared wide-eyed, freezing stiff on the spot. They’d had no idea of Hugi-Mugi’s true identity. Hugi-Mugi, however, was correct. Demons had a different legal code than humanity, under which it was permissible to take as many as three wives.

“H-Hugi...” Cartha asked. “You’re...a demon?”

“I am, yes!” said Hugi-Mugi, a pair of doppeladler wings erupting from his back. “Yes, see?”

“You have wings!” Mato gasped. “Those are not the wings of a demihuman, then, I take it?”

“No, yes! Yes, do you want to see me get bigger?” Hugi-Mugi offered.

“A-Ah!” Mato shook her head. “N-No, thank you! I believe you! Although...” she added, resting her head against Hugi-Mugi’s chest and gazing dreamily up at his face. “I *would* like to fly on my lord’s back sometime...as a date...”

“Well!” said Hugi-Mugi, pulling all three into a tight embrace. “It should be no problem, yes! Yes, after all, there is that peace treaty between the humans and the demons! Would you three like to marry me then? Yes?”

The women smiled blissfully in Hugi-Mugi’s arms.

Half a day later, Hugi-Mugi’s cottage was still full of the voices of arguing women.

“I’m telling you!” Cartha declared. “Hugi and I have known each other the longest, so I should be the natural pick for the first wife!”

“I won’t stand for it!” protested Shino. “Not when I hold the deepest love for Hugi of all of us in my heart!”

“As I am the most indebted to Lord Hugi-Mugi, it stands to reason that the title of first wife should be mine...” Mato proposed.

Yes—Hugi-Mugi being a demon meant that all three women could marry him without any issue, but Cartha, Shino, and Mato now had to settle the issue of which of them was to be Hugi-Mugi’s *first* wife. They had been arguing about this for nearly the entire afternoon.

Hugi-Mugi watched on, a profoundly tired expression on their face. *Women do love to argue about all sorts of things, yes...* they thought.

◇After the Demon Magic Beast Fusion Incident—Dark Citadel Throne Room◇

The Dark One Dawkson sat on the floor in front of his august throne. The Dark One still considered himself unworthy of his station and refused to sit on the

throne itself.

Dawkson looked over the four demons kneeling in front of him. "Well met!" he greeted. "So you're Demmie, the head of House Ulgo, and her retainers, right?"

"Y-Yes, my lord..." Demmie answered, flinching noticeably at being addressed. *I-I-I-I can't believe we got a direct summons from the Dark One Lord Dawkson himself!* she thought. She could feel her heart pounding, and beads of nervous sweat were forming on her brow. *I-I-I-Is this because of papa and the others joining that rebellion? I-I-I-Is he going to execute us?!* Behind her, Genbushein, Rosalina, and Rozen Laurel seemed no less gripped by fear.

"House Ulgo," began the Dark One's minion Phufun, stepping up beside the four of them. "Do you have any wish to join the Dark Army?"

"What...?" Demmie's eyes went wide. "E-Excuse me...are you not going to execute us?"

The Dark One Dawkson couldn't help cracking a smile at Demmie's words. "Oh, the old rebellion House Ulgo was a part of?" he asked. "Who cares about that?! I barely remember it! Nah, I called you here so I could give you a proper reward for vanquishing that blue demon magic beast and saving the kidnapped demon!"

"O-Oh! Um... B-But in the end, we were only able to defeat one of them..." Demmie demurred.

"Hey, one's plenty!" Dawkson said with a smile. "So anyway, whatcha think? You gonna accept our offer or not? Oh, and you won't be in trouble if you don't accept or anything, so don't worry about that."

"Y-Yes!" Demmie said, her face brightening at the Dark One's words. "If you will truly accept one so inexperienced as me, I am prepared to devote my whole body and spirit to serving you, O Dark One!" She prostrated herself, touching her head to the ground as her three retainers followed suit.

F-Finally... Demmie thought, tears coming to her eyes. *Finally I can restore House Ulgo to its proper place of honor!*

Dawkson nodded, a smile on his face.

A few days before the meeting with Demmie, and the morning after their battle with the demon magic beasts, the Dark One Dawkson was in Wuha Gappoli's mansion interior, speaking with a large shovel—none other than Hero Gold-Hair, still stuck in his fused form with the Drilldozer Shovel.

“W-Well, never mind that!” Hero Gold-Hair said, making a sound like he was clearing his throat. “More importantly, Dawkson, there's a favor I want to ask of you.”

“Of course!” said Dawkson. “Anything I can do, my brother.”

“I appreciate it...” Hero Gold-Hair said. “Actually, I was wondering if you could give some kind of award to that House Ulgo lot for defeating the blue demon magic beast.”

“House Ulgo...” Dawkson repeated.

“House Ulgo is one of the clans that rose up to join Lord Zanzibar's rebellion,” said Phufun, not looking up from the documents she was reading as she pressed her glasses up the ridge of her nose in her usual habit. “The head of the house of that time has passed away, however, passing his title on to his daughter.”

“I see...” said Dawkson. “In that case, why don't I just make 'em part of our demonic leadership! We've got Zanzibar on the Infernal Four, so I don't see why not!”

“Understood,” said Phufun, keeping her finger on her glasses so they didn't slip off as she gave a sharp bow. “I will make the arrangements at once.”

If I were still like my old self, I wouldn't have had any second thoughts about sending the lot of them flying with my fists... Dawkson thought back in the present as he recalled his conversation with Hero Gold-Hair the other day.

“Even a former rebel has use, if they have the ability,” said Zanzibar of the Infernal Four, nodding in appreciation from his position standing at the ready to the side. “Truly, it is admirable conduct, worthy of a Dark One.”

Belianna, Zanzibar's peer as an Infernal and fellow devil, giggled knowingly at

his remark. “Damned well said, old man Zanzibar! As far as I’m concerned, having the damned eye to pick me for the Infernal Four makes him the best damned Dark One in history!”

Next to her, the little girl carrying an oversized syringe—the mad scientist Coqueshtti—frowned. *O-Oh, but, but...* she thought, *I really don’t know what to think of him picking me for the Infernal Four when the only thing I know how to do is heal...* She was trembling with nerves. It seemed she still hadn’t internalized that she had, in fact, been selected for the Infernal Four.

One way or another, everyone welcomed House Ulgo eagerly and with open arms.

“So there you have it,” proclaimed Dawkson. “Look forward to workin’ with you!”

“Yes, my lord!”

And so, House Ulgo pledged their allegiance to the Dark One Dawkson.

◇Klyrode Castle—Maiden Queen’s Chambers◇

“Whaaaaat?!” Second Princess Leusoc, the Maiden Queen’s much younger sister, practically shrieked when she heard the news. “E-Elizabeth, are you for real right now?!”

“Leusoc...” the Maiden Queen Elizabeth said, chiding her sister for her language. “There is no need for us to speak like commoners.”

Leusoc was sitting on the sofa in the Queen’s chambers, across from the Maiden Queen herself, wearing an outfit that wouldn’t have looked at all out of place on a coarse adventurer. “No, but, I mean!” she protested, clearly agitated as she began to ramble on. “I rode all the way across that accursed, scorching desert and back without so much as a moment’s rest, all because we received a request from the kingdom of Indol for our assistance in driving the Shadow Conglomerate out of their lands, only to learn that the Shadow Conglomerate had already been destroyed! And now you tell me that it was the wife of the Fli-o’-Rys proprietor?!”

The Maiden Queen smiled knowingly at her sister’s outburst. “Incidentally, Leusoc,” she said, “it seems that the selfsame proprietor has recreated the lost

Enchanted Frigate for us.”

“So I heard...” Leusoc remarked. “That is the vessel that’s been making those regular round trips between the Klyrode Castle Town and the territory of the Dark One now that our peace treaty is in effect, no?”

“Yes, that is one of them. However, Lord Flio is currently readying five more vessels for service. One of them, it seems, will be traveling from the Magical Kingdom to Indol and back. They recently made a test flight and returned with a copy of a new book given to them by the king of Indol.”

“Huh? What?” Leusoc blinked. “Then...sister...how long does it take for this Enchanted Frigate to travel from the Magical Kingdom to Indol and back?”

“Well...” said the Queen. “From what I heard, I believe it was about half a day’s travel.”

“Half a day?!” Leusoc sprung up from the sofa in shock. “Are you for real?!” she exclaimed. “It took me an entire *month* to get back from Indol...” she added, plopping herself back down on the sofa, staring up at the ceiling with a very strained smile on her face.

“Listen, Leusoc...” the Maiden Queen told her. “Your hard work traveling from land to land has not gone unappreciated. You have been a tremendous help in keeping our diplomatic channels open. But consider—with the Enchanted Frigates in service, your duties will become somewhat easier to accomplish as well.”

“That’s true!” Leusoc said, sitting back upright. “I guess I can’t deny it would be nice to have a single year where I’m not running around north and south and east and west the entire time.”

“Yes, precisely!”

Leusoc nodded in understanding, smiling happily at the Queen’s words. “In that case, maybe I’ll finally have time to start seriously looking for a boyfriend! Ha ha! This might be kinda fun!”

“A b-boyfriend...” the Maiden Queen repeated, wincing just slightly. “Leusoc, I really wish you would be just slightly more mindful of your language...”

“Oh, but speaking of boyfriends...” Leusoc carried on.

“Yes?” asked the Queen.

“So when are you and Garyl getting married?”

“*Pfffffft!!!*” the Maiden Queen spat out the black tea she had been daintily sipping.

Leusoc moved over to where the Maiden Queen was sitting and sidled up close. “Swann’s told me all about it, you know,” she said. “I hear you and the Fli-o’-Rys company’s oldest son have been all over each other lately...”

“A-Ah...” the Maiden Queen stammered. “W-We have not gotten so far as talks of marriage yet...”

“*So far*, she says...” Leusoc observed. “So you *are* going out!”

“I—! Th-That’s...!”

“Come on! Tell me everything! You *know* I love gossip!” Leusoc pleaded, grabbing her sister’s arm to keep her from getting away.

“I would like to treat this seriously, if it’s the same to you...” the Maiden Queen muttered, blushing furiously and averting her eyes.

The two continued on in this vein until it was at last time for dinner.

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s Workshop◇

That day, Greanyl and the rest of the shadow demons gathered in Flio’s workshop. This was the same group that had once been the Silent Listeners—the Dark Army’s spy corps and intelligence apparatus. Currently, they were employed as the supply and transit team for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. Lined up before them were five consoles, each made to resemble the cockpit of an Enchanted Frigate.

Greanyl sat down at one of the consoles, and suddenly, all around her she could see an expanse of blue sky. She gasped in awe as she took the controls. “So this is the training simulation platform... Incredible. As long as I’m at the controls, the world in front of my eyes is replaced with a vision of a ship responding to my inputs...”

Greanyl's fellow shadow demons gasped out all the same as they took their own consoles. Flio looked over the crowd and smiled. "As you know, we're planning on flying six Enchanted Frigates at once on set routes all around the world. So, for now, I'd like you all to practice and familiarize yourselves with the controls."

Greanyl screwed up her face in determination as she focused on operating the ship. The training simulation featured all sorts of obstacles, from tall mountains to giant flying magic beasts, all popping up at random. After all, a pilot would need to keep a level head and respond appropriately to the situations that arose, all while keeping the ship on course to reach its destination.

"We'll be conducting live training flights to Indol," said Flio as he watched the shadow demons at work. "So for now, just focus on getting a feel for the basics. I don't expect there to be any emergencies, but just the same I would like you to learn how to address the situation in case something were to go wrong." The shadow demons all nodded seriously as the first five tagged out to let five more take a turn at the controls.

Greanyl, who had been part of the first wave of five, raised her hand. "Excuse me, Mister Flio...?"

"Yes, Greanyl?" Flio asked. "Can I help you?"

"Sir, I have a question. What will become of our road freight network now that we are launching these Enchanted Frigates?"

"Oh, we'll keep our ground teams operating as always," Flio said. "We'll use the Enchanted Frigate routes to link faraway major urban centers to each other, and have horse wagon teams to transport goods to and from the outlying areas."

"I see..." Greanyl breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hm?" Flio cocked his head, curious about Greanyl's behavior. "Is something the matter, Greanyl?"

"O-Oh, no, it's nothing," Greanyl answered. "I was just thinking it would be a little sad if I didn't get to accompany him on our wagon routes anymore..."

Suddenly, she stopped herself, covering her mouth. *O-Oh, no!* she thought. *I let my feelings slip right in front of everyone!* She looked around, at the rest of the shadow demons.

“‘Him’?” one whispered.

“You know,” answered another. “That subordinate of Lord Sleip...”

“Oh? I thought everyone knew!” said a third.

“It’s quite famous, their little love affair.”

It seemed they had been listening after all. Greanyl’s face turned red all the way to the tips of her ears. “U-Um!” she blurted out. “I just remembered an urgent task I need to take care of! Excuse me!” She tossed a smoke bomb to the ground, obscuring herself from sight. When the smoke cleared, Greanyl was gone.

The rest of the shadow demons burst out laughing.

“She knows we all support her, right?”

“We’re all just waiting for them to announce their courtship!”

“Well, Greanyl has always been a bit ridiculous about this sort of thing.”

“All we can do is watch over her with love in our hearts.”

Flio smiled as usual at the crowd of gossiping demons. “All right,” he said, “shall we end the conversation and get back to training?”

“Yes, sir!” the shadow demons proclaimed, saluting in unison. The five who were next in line for the cockpits carried on their training without any more chatter. Flio nodded and watched on, quite satisfied with the progress everyone was making.

That evening after he finished conducting Enchanted Frigate training, Flio was walking through the forest near his house, his daughter Rynàsze following along holding her father’s hand.

“This will be your first time going all the way to the lake, won’t it, Rynàsze?”

“Yes, that’s right!” Rynàsze chirped. “I’m very excited!”

“You’re always running around outside the house, though, aren’t you?” asked Rys, who was holding Rynàsze’s other hand.

“Yes! I love playing outdoors!” Rynàsze answered, smiling at her mother.

“*Snuffle! Snuffle!*” Sybe cried out as it led the way in its unicorn rabbit form, trotting on ahead of the family.

“Hm?” Rys glanced around the area as they walked through the forest.

“What’s wrong, Rys?” Flio asked.

“Oh...” said Rys. “It’s nothing, just...hm?!” Suddenly, her eyes found their target. She stared intently at something far away in the forest.

Flio’s passive Sense Presence spell picked up something just as Rys turned her head. He looked off in the distance in the same direction as his wife. “Huh?”

Thud, thud, thud... Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud... They could hear the sound of footsteps in the distance. They sounded quite large and seemed to be moving at a tremendous speed.

Rys stepped out in the direction of the sound. “A magic beast, by the sound of it,” she said. “My lord husband, leave this to me!” Her lupine wolf ears materialized on her head as she darted towards the thicket ahead, moving like an animal.

Flio cocked his head. “That’s strange... The spell says it’s...”

As he was thinking, something that looked like a magic beast came bounding out of the thicket. Rys’s expression darkened perceptibly when she saw what it was. “M-My lord husband... Don’t tell me...is that...?”

“Looks like it,” said Flio. “As strange as that sounds. Although, Miss Zofina did tell us that one of the beasts went missing, didn’t she...?”

“And of *course* it was *that* one...” Rys sighed, extending her fierce claws from both her hands. But suddenly, a much smaller magic beast leapt out of the underbrush in front of them, straight into Rynàsze’s arms.

“Shhh!” Rynàsze hushed soothingly, gently petting and reassuring the small creature. “Don’t worry! You’re safe!”

As she was petting it, a much larger magic beast came running up from even farther in the brush. It seemed like the smaller creature had been running away. “Where are you going, my cute little unicorn rabbit?” he cooed. “Don’t you know I’m all alone, lost far from my home world here? I’m so lonely I just can’t help it! So that’s why—”

That was as far as Leonorna got before he was silenced by one of Rys’s savage spinning kicks. “The perverted Divine Beast,” she hissed. “What are you doing in this world?!”

“Wh-Why! If it isn’t the lady with that spectacular pair of— Gack!” the lion cried as another one of Rys’s kicks sent him crashing to the ground, his mane fluttering spectacularly. He twitched and spasmed, clearly unconscious.

Flio and Rys looked down at the Divine Beast. “I don’t believe it...” Flio said. “The Divine Beast Leonorna fled to our world?”

“So it seems,” said Rys, huffing in anger at the unconscious Leonorna. “What a troublesome creature. And to think, he was picking on a magic beast not even half his size...”

“Speaking of, let’s see this unicorn rabbit...”

Flio watched as Rynàsze set the unicorn rabbit down in front of Sybe, who was currently a unicorn rabbit at the moment itself. “Sybe,” Rynàsze explained in a gentle voice, “this unicorn rabbit just had a very big scare. Since you’re a unicorn rabbit too, do you think you could cheer it up?”

Sybe stood up on its hind legs and thumped its paw against its chest as if to say, “*Leave it to me!*”

The other unicorn rabbit inched timidly nearer to Sybe, who lowered its head and approached. The two gently bumped their horns together before moving in closer and nuzzling against one another.

Rynàsze watched happily as the two unicorn rabbits mingled. “Excellent! I’m so happy you’re getting along! I’m sure you two will be the best of friends!” she said, smiling happily and patting the two rabbits on the head. Sybe and its new friend sidled up to her, nuzzling against her leg as she continued to pet the critters.

Her parents, Flio and Rys, smiled as they watched.

“That horned rabbit is a female, if I’m not mistaken,” Flio remarked.

“So it seems!” Rys agreed. “Then, perhaps, she’ll end up as Sybe’s wife?”

“Who can say!” said Flio. “But they seem to like each other, and she’s taken to Rynàsze so much already...perhaps we should adopt her into the family?”

“That sounds like a lovely idea to me!” Rys said, nodding brightly. A second later, however, her expression changed. She furrowed her brow, looking behind her at the unconscious lion. “That aside...my lord husband, what are we to do with this so-called Divine Beast?”

“I’ll just contact Miss Zofina from the Celestial Plane,” Flio said. “She’ll come to pick him up in no time, I’m sure.”

Rys breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, good. I would hate it if we had to keep him around to keep an eye on him...”

Rynàsze, Sybe, and the new unicorn rabbit all furiously nodded in agreement.

“All right. Let’s get Zofina to pick up Leonorna and head to the lake.”

Rys and the rest nodded, and so it was settled.



Afterword

Thank you so much for reading my book! It's amazing to think that we've already finished volume nine of *Level 2 Cheat*. I mentioned this last time, but the comic version of the story by Itomachi is currently on sale as well. I've been enjoying it very much myself.

This volume featured an extra helping of Hero Gold-Hair's ongoing journey. In some ways his party is the polar opposite of Flio and his family, helping flesh out the world of *Level 2 Cheat* in all sorts of ways. There were all sorts of different stories packed into this one book, but I did my best to make it all as coherent as I could. I hope it all makes sense, but I'm sure some of it will be just a bit confusing. I'm very grateful for everyone's support through it all. This story would have never come this far without you. And I'm very much looking forward to seeing the next volume of the manga from the folks at Comic Gardo!

Finally, I would like to thank Katagiri once again for the excellent illustrations, as well as everyone at Overlap for their work on the publishing end, and everyone who read this book from the bottom of my heart.

Miya Kinojo, January 2020



Chillin' in Another World
WITH **LV 2**
SUPER CHEAT POWERS

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

9

Name Rynàsze 8

Name Rabbitz 8

Name Belalio 8

Name Calsi'im 8

Name Rys 8

“What splendid clothes! They’re absolutely adorable!”

“Love papa!”





“I see...
So it was you...
My partner...”

Name | Hero Gold-Hair | 8



Name | Valentine | 8



Name | Tsuya | 8

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Chapter 1: Flio's House Gets Even Bigger](#)

[Chapter 2: Are These Goddesses Useful for Anything?! \(Descent of the No-Goddess\)](#)

[Chapter 3: Hole: Thus Hero Gold-Hair Fought](#)

[Chapter 4: Rys, the Goddess?](#)

[Epilogue](#)

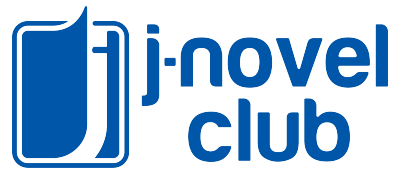
[Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 9](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 10 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers: Volume 9

by Miya Kinojo

Translated by Meteora Edited by Samantha J. Moore

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 Miya Kinojo Illustrations by Katagiri

Cover illustration by Katagiri All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo
English translation © 2023 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: April 2023